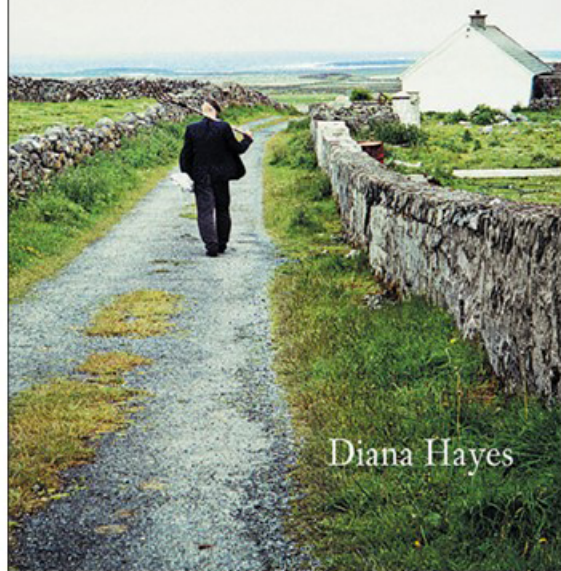


LOOKING for CORNELIUS

a novella



LOOKING FOR CORNELIUS

by Diana Hayes

Resource Publications, 2025; 148 pages; \$21.00

Reviewed by Trevor Carolan

In the diaspora, Ireland's far-flung Paddies ache for an island where even if you've not been before, the Customs officer looks at your arrival name, saying, "Welcome home."

BC poet Diana Hayes has seven collections and is in the excellent Mother Tongue anthologies. With this, her eighth book, she breaks the mould. A fictional novella that borrows from the *roman à clef* tradition in using real-life names and experience, along with thinly-veiled characters, its plot lines amplify the intimate, condensed style Vancouver's Ethel Wilson established as the genre's gold-standard. BC though, doesn't figure here; we're in the south half of holy Ireland, on the road from Dublin to Cork and its western hamlets.

Dierdre the narrator brings a tale. A teacher of traditional Irish music at St. Anne's Academy in Montreal, she leads her young charges with a passion. Her coppery curls, turquoise skirts and Blundstone boots get her called "all hair and no patience" by her colleagues. But her left-handed, offbeat manner inspires students, one of whom — Eamon — a thirteen-year-old violin prodigy of "unruly intelligence," she intuits, is destined for acclaim.

Hayes builds her portrait of Dierdre, giving her an unruly Gaelic surname — Ó hAodha, that sounds close to Ó Haye, and inflects Dierdre's personal world with glimmers of the Celtic mythology that helps define her. The book's first page echoes the Republican vow every IRA captive in Long Kesh prison learned in Gaelic — and there are licks of ancient Ogham, famine song refrains, and Dierdre's enduring love of St. Brigid — Eire's beloved Earth Goddess — that shape her image. Fostered out at twelve when a house fire took her parents and siblings, sparing only her childhood fiddle, she's a likeable, vulnerable figure playing the traditional music circuit and mentoring kids. All she needs is to discover who she really is.

Eamon runs like-to-like. Another orphan, adopted by Polish immigrants, there's vestigial Irishness in him and his instrument that won't quit. All he requires is a chance to keep learning. Wouldn't you know it? There's a scholarship prize at the annual recital competition in Cork. "Hang on tight to your dreams," Dierdre tells the lad. "That is where everything begins."

For years, a night-visitor has haunted her own dreams — a lanky figure, perhaps a great-grandfather, Cornelius, who fled Eire to survive *An Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger — England's contribution to world genocide. She yearns to learn more of his, and her, roots. Add a flight and a rented car and the Montreal pair are off, road-tripping through the Irish countryside's forty shades of green, its saintly wells and epic ruins older than Egypt's pyramids — each unfolding a mythic story, onward into Ethel Wilson's *genius loci*, to Hibernia's deeper holiness of *place*.

From Dublin's Grafton Street and Bewley's exquisite teahouse, to the natural splendor of

Glendalough, the Wicklow Mountains, and Cobh's superb harbour, the pair progress without Hayes missing occasion to slip in another phrase in *Gaeilge*. Music rollicks the pubs they visit, and both actual and imagined artists step forward. One, Rory Callaghan, from Dierdre's past appears in a tender moment: we see she's known happiness. But it's Eamon's crusade and moving beyond mere travelogue, where there are still mysteries and histories for teacher and pupil to unlock.

Awash in Celtic lore, Hayes's novella expands into magic realism, melding roots discovery, tragedy, a breeze of romance, and what Paddies know as *the blarney*. It's a heckuva tale and in the *Gael-tacht*, the old world, sure every neo-pagan word might even be true. Hayes has new poetry, *Hawking the Surf*, coming next. A forecast?



LETTERS TO KAFKA: A NOVEL

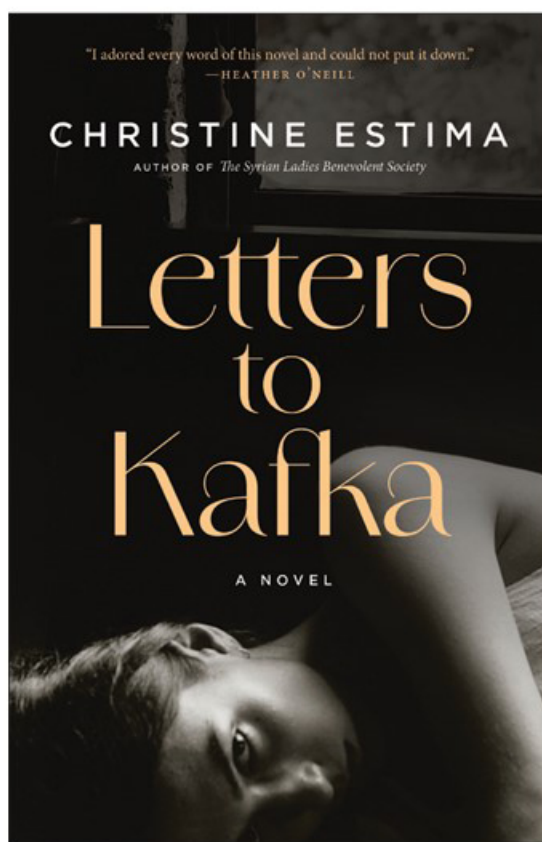
Christine Estima

House of Anansi, 2025; 372 pages; \$26.99

Reviewed by Tom Sandborn

Kafka did his secretive best to ensure that no one would be able to see the ghosts that haunt his correspondence with Milena Jesenska. The famously neurotic genius wanted the correspondence between him and the young Czech translator (and, briefly, lover) destroyed and ordered her to burn his letters to her. Fortunately for Kafka scholars and contemporary feminists, Jesenska was in this — as in so many moments in her life — defiantly disobedient. She retained her letters from Kafka after his death, and they survived to be published as *Letters to Milena* in 1952.

Like many female partners to "men of genius," Jesenska was largely lost to history in the long shadow of a man's recognized achievements and the entrenched sexism that refused to see a woman as a free-standing, autonomous being. She could be his muse, or erotic diversion, but



not really his equal or colleague. Although she had a long and adventurous life before and after her involvement with Kafka, Jesenska has mainly been known through a volume of Kafka's surviving letters to her during their brief affair. Now Toronto-based author Christine Estima has written a superb novel based on Jesenska's life that brings her story out of the shadows.

She was born in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in 1896. Her father, a dominating and ambivalent influence in her life, was a prominent oral surgeon, professor at Charles University, Czech nationalist, and anti-Semite. He sent her to Prague's first progressive school for girls, the Minerva School, but reacted to her adolescent rebellions (especially her affair with the Jewish intellectual Ernst Pollak), by having her committed to an asylum for "moral insanity." Undaunted, Jesenska married Pollack after her time in the asylum and moved to Vienna, where she first met Franz Kafka. She was his first translator, and they had a