

THE RASMUSSEN PAPERS

Connie Gault

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Press

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For Joan Givner, biographer, writer, friend

“If you write books don’t you sell them?”

“Do you mean don’t people buy them? A little—not so much as I could wish. Writing books, unless one be a great genius—and even then!—is the last road to fortune. I think there is no more money to be made by literature.”

Henry James

The Aspern Papers

1888

{ 1 }

MY FRIEND HAD done something different with her eyebrows the day we met for lunch, and it was making me pay more attention than usual to her face. I think as well as plucking them she had shaved them a bit, or maybe she'd been to a cosmetician to have them shaped. The change opened her up, gave her an attractive, puckish look. She seemed ready at any moment to smirk at something I said. It also looked as if she anticipated sharing the joke with me, although presumably neither of us yet knew what it was.

This friend has a sympathetic face and she is a good listener when she listens, but there are times when she sinks into her own world, and I was aware, by the time we received our meals, that she had drifted somewhere a little off. She had already heard a lot about my Toronto stay and the whole convoluted situation I'd encountered there. She had heard enough.

"You should read *The Aspern Papers*," she said. "Henry James."

I thought she'd stopped listening to me, but no; subtly, wryly, she was telling me her little appropriate joke. I was fond of Henry James; the next day I obtained and devoured the book. The experience of reading it was so like looking

into a mirror that I decided to write my own account as a way of discovering what, sifting the weeks of my similar pursuit, I might still have to learn. I would use his plot is what I mean. I didn't forget that the image you see in a mirror is reversed. I would write a woman's version. It was fun contemplating setting out in the lively manner of the Master. I had no trouble knowing where to begin.

{ 2 }

I DIDN'T EXPECT Ryan Benson would be the one to solve my problem. I hadn't thought he'd interest himself in my venture and might not have mentioned it if we hadn't run out of conversation so soon. He was only interviewing me for a small spot in an already mostly written article on regionalism in Canadian literature. There was little to say on the topic that hadn't been said before, and he didn't pretend for a second that I would add anything important to the discussion. Although I had written a book of essays on one of Western Canada's finest poets, he stopped taking notes before we'd drained our chai lattes. That made a total of two notes in his quaint leather-bound notebook (not his only affectation; another was a lemon yellow silk scarf knotted at his neck). One note was only the date and my name, and the other was a pithy comment marked end to end with those little squiggles that meant I would—not for the first time—live to regret giving my opinion. Together, after those jottings, we stared out the window and watched the passersby on far Queen West, many of them with neon hair, bondage-grade chains, and leather bits. Oh yes, and tattoos, planted up their arms like succulents. There were also those who attracted

attention more originally and less voluntarily with odd tics, grimaces, and gaucheries. They were more my kind, the ones who looked about to trip at any moment, with nothing as solid as a sidewalk to land on.

And then I asked Ryan Benson if by any chance he knew anything about old Aubrey Ash, who was rumoured to have been Marianne Rasmussen's lover.

That sparked him. "You know the story?" he asked. "How the two of them, Marianne and Aubrey, were caught dancing together late one night, at a writers' retreat—in the nude?"

Marianne and Aubrey, he called them, as if he'd known them well in their heyday. They were *caught*, he said, and I thought, like bugs in amber, although the light would have been silver.

"It was back in the sixties," he said.

"Those wild sixties," I said.

It was an old story and not remarkable as scandals go, but it happened that the two of them danced on the moonlit grounds of a Benedictine abbey, that night so long ago, and the image of their blithe bodies waltzing over the shadowy grass, under the looming bell tower, had proved irresistible and kept it in circulation all these years.

"I'd love to meet him," I said. "But no one seems to be able to tell me if he's alive or dead."

A boyish look crossed Ryan's face. He leapt to his feet, took hold of my arm, and steered me out of the café.

"What?" I said.

"I'll take you to him." He still had hold of my arm, and a good thing too; I wasn't used to sidewalk traffic like we encountered on far Queen West. In spite of my own excitement (I stopped breathing when he said he could take me to Aubrey

Ash), I was distracted enough to slow down and gawk. He was having none of that. "With the element of surprise, we might get in to see him," he said, sounding like both the Hardy boys at once.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he dragged me onto a streetcar.

"Cabbagetown," he said.



CONNIE GAULT has written for stage and radio and film. Her first novel, *Euphoria*, won a Saskatchewan Book Award for Fiction and was short-listed for the High Plains Fiction Award and the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book of Canada and the Caribbean. *A Beauty* won the 2016 Saskatchewan Book of the Year as well as the award for fiction, and was long-listed for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. A former prose editor of *Grain* magazine, Connie has also edited books of fiction and has taught many creative writing classes and mentored emerging writers. After spending most of her life in Saskatchewan, she now lives in London, Ontario.