

READER'S GUIDE

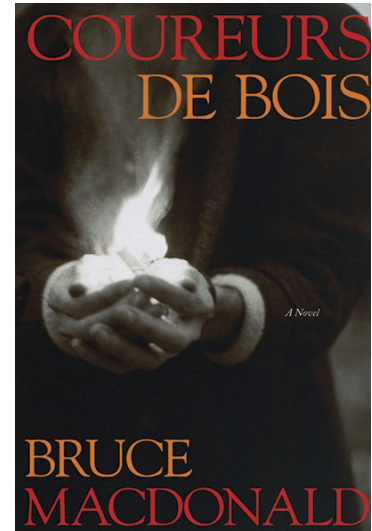


Coueurs de Bois by Bruce MacDonald

Cormorant Books Inc.

INTRODUCING *Coueurs de Bois*

Coueurs de Bois recounts the impudent odyssey of William Tobe, an Ottawa born economics grad, who moves to Toronto and falls under the spell of the recently paroled Randall Cobb Seymour. "The Cobb" is a vengefully shrewd and charismatic Native Canadian, and is the embodiment of the trickster – a powerfully animated personality of cunning, gall, and uninhibited entrepreneurial instincts. He is hell-bent on beating the white man at his own dirty game, and good-hearted Will not only becomes involved in Cobb's scams, but finds himself swept up in his own evolving urban vision quest.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Coueurs de Bois

The title of the novel is suggestive of the theme of subverting authority. In colonial Canada, the coueurs de bois worked with the Native Canadians to collect and trade furs without the permission of the French government. This is also suggestive of the relationship between Cobb and Will, who are both attempting to subvert authority in their own ways. Cobb rejects the traditional parole officer/parolee relationship, and creates a new one. He also undermines the authority of his court-ordered psychologist. Will seeks relief from the structures that had constrained him for most of his life in Ottawa, the expectations placed on him by his father a burden. The business Cobb and Will have established is largely illegal; through this, Cobb succeeds at subverting the authority that has oppressed his people.

Visions

William Tobe and Cobb meet each other because they have both followed their visions, and it is their visions that guide the novel. Cobb's vision is something that he must fulfill. His vision was a dream, and "all contracts come from dreams because all ideas are dreamed in the places between the seasons, behind the wind, on the dark side of the moon."

A New Economy

Tobe and Cobb try to carve out a new economy. Cobb wants to beat the white man at his own game and convinces Will to join him. Will, anxious to participate in anything that might shed some light on his vision, puts his education to use to thwart the system.

Q&A WITH BRUCE MacDONALD

1. Where did the idea for *Coureurs de Bois* come from?

Coureurs de Bois as a novel has its roots in the two poets that dominated the early development of my literary imagination: Ted Hughes and Wallace Stevens. From Hughes I got the awesome power of Crow and the basic cosmology of the trickster. I was fascinated with the idea of an entity with a lot of power but no ability to love. It's an apt description of money, which, like Crow, is a non-corporeal entity, a spirit of sorts.

From Stevens I took the idea of imagination as reality, and from William Blake as well the idea of a kind of object imagination that speaks back to consciousness. This was seeded in William Tobe as his spiritual directive. Crow was seeded in Cobb as his directive, a kind of protection for a price. Cobb is charged with pure power and unburdened by the responsibility to love.

The body of the novel emerged by just playing off of all of these mythologies: Crow, Money, and William Tobe's inner world. Around all of this is authority: doctors, police officers, lawyers, judges, and parole officers. They are the unimagined world. They judge what is right and wrong, but often times they forfeit judgment, or seem afraid of confrontation.

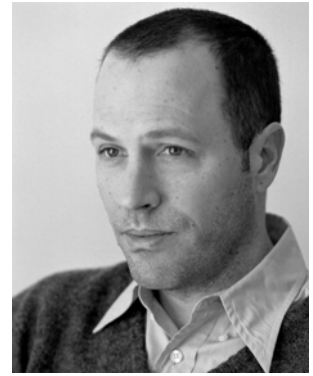
Writing the book was not a linear process. It seemed to come out all over the narrative timeline. There were so many voices that the main task was narrative harmony near the end, proper order, and tone. The seasonal sections, spring to winter, reference the first economies, and the animism and paganism we get through Cobb and his hijinks are an expression of the inner life of early economies. The fiscal quarters of the corporation are the modern expression of our seasons. The inner life of the modern economy is explored through the authority figures. William Tobe has left his tribe. He is a coureurs de bois. He gets a unique inner life.

2. The Parkdale described in your book will soon no longer exist as gentrification is rapidly changing the landscape of the neighbourhood and its occupants. Can you comment on that?

Parkdale has been talking the gentrification talk since the mid-eighties, but I don't see it happening. It was depopulated of rich and middle class when Toronto built the Gardner, a fatal urban mistake that Chicago also made when it cut the city off from its lake with a thoroughfare. Chicago has its projects in the geographic equivalent of Parkdale, down by the lake. Parkdale has redone the Drake and the Gladstone, and there are some really creative people investing in Parkdale, but you can still find a Robert Polski to have a coffee with and you can still get a fifteen dollar blowjob from a crack whore. When those things are gone, I'll buy the gentrification rumours.

3. William Tobe predicts a future economy wherein oxygen will be bought and sold as a commodity. There has been much news coverage of late on climate change, which has involved a discussion of wealthy, polluting countries (and individuals) buying "carbon offsets" to assuage their guilt and fulfill their Kyoto Agreement obligations. Can you comment on that?

In March 2007, a man by the name of Drummond, the chief economist with TD Bank, was quoted in the *Toronto Star*, saying that the problem with oxygen is that it is perceived as free, not a commodity, and he said that had to change. I think carbon bonds are going to come into the market. It's very disturbing, a grotesque bookend to the water economy, which is just as scary in the near future. It seems sometimes like so much more than just climate change. It seems like accelerated environmental entropy.



ABOUT BRUCE

Bruce MacDonald is a graduate of the journalism program at Toronto's Ryerson University.

He grew up in Ottawa and has lived in Vancouver and Taiwan.

Currently, he lives in Toronto, where he works as a technical writer.

Keep in mind, as well, that we practise fractional reserve banking. That means that any capital created to deal with environmental decay will not provide new and real wealth, as money is supposed to, and it will tax us to maintain our environment for no other reason than money was created to make interest on itself. Capitalism is a kind of steroid in an economy when compared with the slower socialist economies we've seen. It works quickly for development, but for repair the usury actually accelerates the economic entropy because we have to pay interest on no new wealth. It's a slippery slope. There's a reason the political right has called climate change a socialist conspiracy.

4. As the story developed, were you surprised with the direction it took, or did you know the ending when you began?

Cobb and Will are introduced through their interiors. Cobb is bound to Crow. Will is awakened by an inner experience that defies all previous definitions of inner experience. Cobb is a reactive cycle. I knew that to finish that character he had to be released, and so he goes back to love by going to Costa Rica. Will is an active cycle. His response to his inner experience is not servitude, like Cobb, but liberation. He follows it with joyful duty. To end this character I had to unite his inner and outer worlds, to make the vision real for him while staying in a container that would not disrupt the verisimilitude of the book. Those are the two things I knew when I started those characters. Cobb had a spiritual parole to serve with Crow, and William Tobe's vision had to touch the world in a real and meaningful way.

5. How did you go about writing on visions and vision quests?

I am a big fan of Shambala Press in Boston. They've made it their mission to translate all the sacred literatures and scriptures of the world into English. Spiritual literature defines forces that act upon consciousness and sometimes speak in images. It's a non-verbal language. One simple Biblical example is the dream Joseph had to leave with his wife and child for fear of their son's death. Nowhere in science and rational authority do we get any evidence of a consciousness connected to the world in that way. I created a vision for William Tobe. I preceded it by a radical change to his body chemistry, seven days of fasting, and I defined it as something indefinable in the immediate. The vision quest is the journey of understanding. It is the time and trial between the vision and the meaning, the yoke of the vision.

Money itself is a part of the mystical legacy of western culture. It is predicated on the hope that imagination and autonomous knowledge will fuel the expansion of capital in pursuit of the god-given right to prosper. Money and vision are in a co-dependant relationship in our modern economies. It's a kind of faith. However, you can't pay your taxes on the profit derived from a spiritual economy, so in our modern world we sometimes have to make choices between well imagined and unimagined lives, depending on what kind of security we want. Money limits life. I do not see money as a conspiracy. I see it as the centre of our rational existence, but, at the same time, completely irrational itself, more allegorical than literal, and, in a very humorous way, sustained by our belief in it.

Beyond money and vision being connected, some of the first economies in the world are spiritual. Karma is an economy pertaining to thought, feeling, and action. Sin is a kind of economy. The first notions of debt might very well be spiritual. Even the sacrifice of animals as offering is part of a celestial economy. Goods and services are being exchanged with non-corporeal entities. It abounds the more you think about it. These were some of the ways I thought about vision when writing *Coueurs de Bois*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Coureurs de bois were fur traders who operated without permission of the French government, and in many cases lived as the Native Canadians did. How is William Tobe a coureur de bois?
2. Discuss the importance of visions in the book.
3. Will is a privileged, educated white man. Cobb is a Native Canadian recently released from prison. Dr. Blulette is a doctor, an elite of society. Paddy Pape is a parole officer. Persey is a psychology student. How do these characters meet or defy stereotypes?
4. Are Will and Cobb's actions the result of freedom of choice or destiny?
5. Discuss women in the novel. What roles do they play?
6. The visions that both Cobb and Will have are powerful, and lead them to make life-changing decisions. Against the backdrop of the Mental Health Hospital and the schizophrenics who populate the neighbourhood, what makes their visions different? Or are their visions different? Or is it a matter of perception? How do others respond to their visions?
7. How is the "Queen's economy" challenged by Will and Cobb?
8. Will's vision contains: a stream, a bright light, a crow, a crucifix, a black bear, a stone, and purple flowers. What do they represent?
9. What moral/ethical choices do the characters make?
10. In what ways do the events in the book reveal evidence of the author's worldview?
11. What was surprising about the ending of the book?