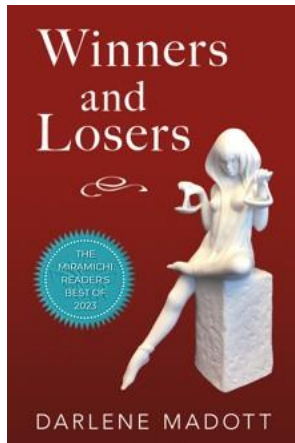


Madott, Darlene. *Winners and Losers*. Hamilton, ON: Guernica Editions. 2023. Pp 313. ISBN 978-1-77183-767-5 (paperback) \$25.



Winners and Losers, Darlene Madott's new work of fiction is a literary melange, chockful of thought-provoking stories, a medley of well-written, entertaining, and often surprising bits and pieces of life's difficult moments. In what is more of a novel than a collection of short stories, the reader will find a slew of literary fragments that are little diamonds shining a light in the dark corners of the self, of human relationships, and of a litigious society. Through a meandering criss-crossing time frame spanning four decades, the novel provides the reader with a fascinating front row seat to legal cases that parade the justice system's winners and losers. The novel revolves around Francesca Malotti, an intelligent, sensitive, and at times insecure woman who is also a determined and successful lawyer navigating a world of accused and accusers, trying to sort out truths and lies while making sense of her own personal life. Her legal cases provide Francesca with life lessons as she navigates both successfully and unsuccessfully her relationship with her parents, her sister Rose, her husband Zachary, her son Marco, her co-workers and her clients. Each case reveals something about the capacity of human beings to deceive themselves and others. Madott masterly blends and intertwines Francesca's personal life with these fascinating legal cases, "Who do my questions reveal but her questioner...?" This skillful blending is best seen in chapters like 'The Ceiling Price' where the author-narrator-protagonist explores the ceiling price of telling the truth and her own role in the story; "The one thing I could have said with honesty was that Winston was loved by his friends – I, Francesca among them." This first vignette is a delightful introduction to the legal system, to Francesca's personality and to her reassessment of the world around her, both professionally and personally, seen from the vantage of an end of career perspective. In 'Betrayal', we have Margaret Meanie whose name foreshadows the mean world of office politics and in particular the one among young articling students. The chapter 'The Question' tells us about the elderly and not-so frail Edna Hamilton who may or may not be telling the truth about an \$82,672.35 cheque. It questions our own perception of what is 'truth'. In 'Replevin', the reader learns about the legality of the repossession of goods wrongfully detained through the story of the artist Chinkok Tan whose paintings were unlawfully seized by an art dealer. Although Francesca wins

the case, it is the lesson learned from it that may be even more important: “The thing about replevied goods – they never come back the same.” And, “That’s the thing about replevied goods – the damage done is never repaired, the losses never fully recovered.” The events surrounding that case lead Francesca to reflect on her own personal replevin. In ‘Newton’s Third Law’, Iryna Buriak finds ways to deal with an abusive husband and takes control of her own narrative. Another lesson for Francesca to learn. There are many other cases, stories, anecdotes that continue this plethora of life lessons. Chapters like ‘The Ceiling Price’, ‘The Question’, and ‘Newton’s Third Law’ are the best in this collection of great stories because they succeed in so many ways and on so many levels. They are not only well-written and fascinating cases but Madott’s delicate and balanced use of the author-narrator-protagonist format takes these renderings to higher literary levels. *Winners and Losers* mixes at will the narrative thread: at times first person, at others third person (a distant or close omniscience), and at times in the form of a diary. It can be quite jarring to find the protagonist Francesca separated from Francesca the narrator while she still anchors different story lines. But one soon gets used to it, and more surprisingly, it works. Madott adds a final twist to this mix of narrative styles, choosing to add an epilogue that is clearly autobiographical and which at first seems quite out of place as Francesca or Madott (as she stealthily unmask herself in this last chapter) reflects on her life and on the purpose of what she has written: “To express all the love, ambivalence, conflict and tenderness that I feel for the profession and for the work that sustained me over four decades....” It could be a mistake to read it as a collection of linked short stories. The reader may be better served to read *Winners and Losers* as a novel or more precisely as a récit, a sub-genre of the novel made popular in France by authors like Camus, Gide, and more recently, Annie Ernaux. *Winners and Losers* is at home in this well-established genre with biographic splashes where the author-narrator-protagonist revisits an event, events or even a lifetime, and without a hint of nostalgia ‘retells’ what has happened to him or her having the benefit of the passing of time as a barometer of what was. Whether Reading *Winners and Losers* as a novel, a récit, a roman-mémoire, or a collection of linked short stories, you will not be disappointed.