

Hardcover: US

Delusions of grandeur

Thomas Trofimuk's first novel is a somewhat perplexing journey through the psychosis of a man who believes himself to be the famed explorer

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

In an ideal world, critics shouldn't read the reviews on Amazon.com. And usually I don't, not because they might alter my basic reaction to a book, but because they can so easily infiltrate phrases and even ideas, and dilute one's original impression of the text.

But in the case of Thomas Trofimuk's *Waiting for Columbus* I succumbed. I did so because I was genuinely perplexed by the book, the first novel by a Canadian "writer, editor and communications consultant." But immediately after I started sampling the online reviews I understood my dilemma. The reviews were split down the middle, some calling the novel an overwhelming experience, others saying they were close to throwing it into the trash can.

The story concerns a patient in an asylum in modern-day Seville who thinks he's Christopher Columbus. He's delusional, of course, but any explanation of how he reached this mental state is left to the very end of the book. In the mean time we're treated to lengthy passages in which Columbus is interviewed by Queen Isabella of Spain (who falls in love with him and is at the same time notably foul-mouthed) and meets Norsemen in the seas north of Britain who tell him tales of a land far to the west called Vinland. These episodes are mixed in with scenes at the asylum, an enlightened place where patients try out unusual gambits in games of chess played against the director, drink wine and go on trips to the beach.

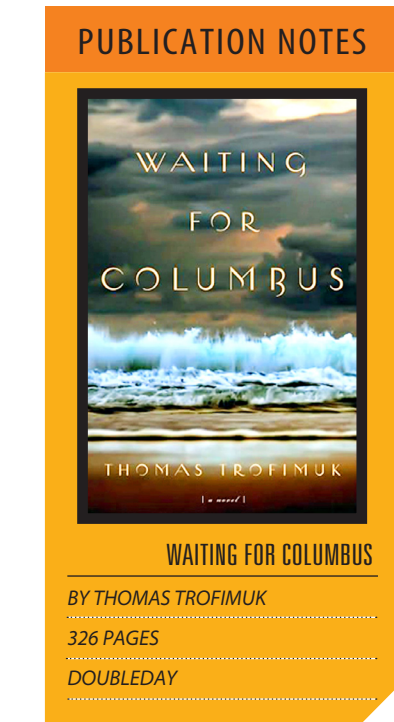
Two characters soon come to the forefront: a nurse named Consuela who falls in love with the self-styled Columbus and an Interpol agent, Emile, who has come down from Paris in search of a missing person. It gives nothing away to reveal that this person is, of course, "Columbus," but it would spoil any suspense the book has to disclose what train of events has led him to his present situation and fueled his delusion.

It's tempting to say that this is a "power of love" novel, and that the sense of superiority such an unimpeachable, even transcendent, theme could be thought to give the book takes the place of any identifiable literary qualities. Such an analysis would certainly account for the disparity in the online reactions, those who are deeply moved by the novel's ostensible theme giving it five stars, but those who focus instead on the self-consciousness of the writer, struggling hard to attain "fine writing" but laboring under his own rule of an almost constant present tense, giving it two at best.

On balance, I found the novel to be an ambitious and competent piece of work, though less than gripping. The problem is perhaps that Random House (here in the guise of Doubleday) has over-promoted the book, with the result that expectations have been on par with a major literary event, whereas the fact is that this is simply one more novel, interesting enough, but fit for a rather limited audience.

This over-promotion is reflected in the blurb that describes the book. "Breathtaking prose," "the final, stunning page," "a dazzling story," "this unforgettable novel" — this kind of PR benefits no one (certainly not the author) and only serves to endorse the definition of advertising as the art of lying for money.

Another strange feature of the book is that its plot is retrospectively more interesting than it can ever have been while you were reading it. The "solution" to the



mystery is the best thing in the whole story, making it strongly relevant to current world events. But because you have to read 300 pages before getting to it, you're inevitably in two minds about the sections concerning Queen Isabella's fantasies, Columbus' problems getting backing for his expedition, the events on his ships when becalmed in the Doldrums, fears of the Inquisition and so on.

The question of what these historical passages actually signify is also troubling. They are clearly the result of considerable research on Trofimuk's part, but are they the fantasies of the modern-day supposed "Columbus," or some species of historical flashback? The significant part of the answer to this is that, whichever they are, they are ill-digested. And this, I think, is at the heart of the book's shortcomings.

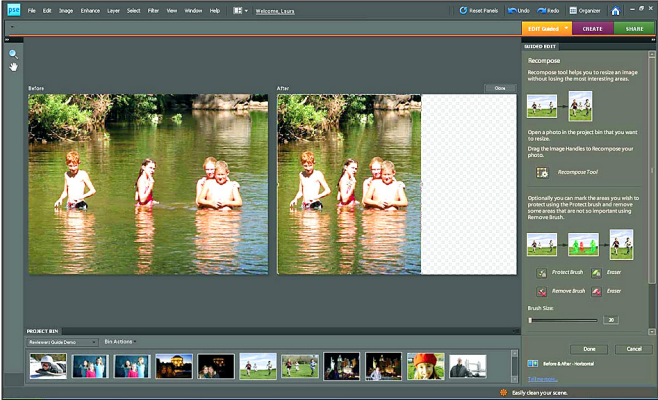
The historical matter is of course intrinsically interesting, though it's a subject that has had more than its fair share of exposure. Had the author selected a less well-known event there might have been greater justification for the extensive attention he allots it. But maybe Trofimuk had an eye on sales and the almost limitless interest there is in Columbus' voyage in Canada and the US.

Waiting for Columbus might have been better as a tighter, shorter thriller in the style of Georges Simenon, an extremely prolific writer who, according to legend, rarely took more than 13 days to compose a novel. Trofimuk would benefit from a dose of that attitude. It seems to me that he takes himself too seriously and probably devoted a year or more to his task. A breezier, more closely focused, matter-of-fact approach would have worked wonders.

So, read this novel only if you have time on your hands, don't expect a thrill a minute, and don't expect a literary masterpiece either. What you will find is a reasonably insightful work about psychiatric delusion, but one that is itself characterized by not inconsiderable delusions of grandeur on the writer's part. There must be a moral here but, in the somewhat diffuse state of mind brought about by reading this meandering, rather self-important novel, I can't at the moment work out quite what it might be.

Technology

AN EASIER-TO-UNDERSTAND PHOTOSHOP FOR AMATEURS



Adobe's Photoshop Elements 8.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Adobe recently announced a new version of its popular Photoshop Elements 8 picture-editing software. As you might expect, Photoshop Elements uses the same algorithms as Adobe's professional-level Photoshop software, but the features are much more accessible to users. Think of it as Photoshop for very smart dummies.

The Organizer in Elements can now check for problems like blurry focus or poorly lighted photos. The Smart Tags tool can flag and suggest fixes to these images.

Adobe has also improved its face-recognition technology to make it a bit faster to verify the correct association of names with faces.

Adobe has enhanced its Quick Fix feature by making it easier to understand photo-editing terms. The company says many users have not taken advantage of certain adjustments, like temperature, because they simply didn't understand the language. To help, the Quick Fix tool displays changes to the main image as you edit, a useful addition for more casual users.

The Windows versions of Photoshop Elements 8 is available now for US\$100. The Mac version will be available in October for the same price.

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3D PHOTOS FROM A POINT-AND-SHOOT, NO GLASSES NEEDED

We are entering the third dimension. And we're doing so without the cheesy glasses.

Fujifilm just took the wraps off its long-awaited 3D camera and photo frame, which can also capture and display regular 2D images. The technology seems likely to appeal primarily to a small group of stereoscopic photo enthusiasts.

The US\$600 FinePix Real 3D camera employs dual lenses and CCD sensors to capture and process two 10-megapixel images and overlay them to create the 3D effect. It's a solid chunk of camera, housed in a sturdy aluminum die-cast frame, but it's also much bulkier than your average point-and-shoot. The US\$500 FinePix Real 3D V1 viewer is an 8-inch photo frame with an SD card slot for loading images and video. (It also has 512 megabytes of built-in memory). You have to find the sweet spot to match the images properly, and when you don't, you'll see plenty of ghosting. Next month, users of the 3D camera can order 3D "lenticular prints" online from Fujifilm. The photos take two weeks to process, at a special lab in Tokyo.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Fujifilm's FinePix Real 3D camera.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Above: Bowers & Wilkins' Zeppelin Mini iPod dock.



Right: Bose's SoundDock 10.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

HIGH-END PRODUCTS FOR PUTTING DIGITAL MUSIC IN THE AIR

The Bowers & Wilkins Mini Zeppelin and the Bose SoundDock 10 are fairly expensive systems for playing music from an iPod, iPhone or computer (US\$400 for the Mini Zeppelin, coming next month; US\$600 for the Bose, available now). Both companies say the technology inside makes it worth it. The Mini Zeppelin streams digital data directly from a music device using what the British company says is an audiophile-grade digital-to-analog (DAC) converter, bypassing the DACs in the music players.

The Bose SoundDock 10 has a few tricks of its own, including a pair of proprietary Twiddler transducers (a combination of a high-frequency transducer and midrange driver; in other words, a speaker).

There's an auxiliary input and video output (to use the iPod to send content to a TV) but no USB connector. Bose says it will offer an optional US\$150 Bluetooth dock to stream music from a phone.

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A COCOON OF WARMTH FOR YOU, POWER FOR YOUR TOYS

Mountain Hardwear's jacket has heating elements to keep you warm and a power adapter in the pocket, right, to charge your devices.

Mountain Hardwear has developed a winter jacket with a heating element that will keep you toasty while it charges your gadgets.

Reach into the front left pocket and you'll find a power adapter that enables you to charge your iPod, digital camera, GPS device or cellphone.

The US\$240 jackets, branded Refugium for men and Radiance for women, are sold separately from the rechargeable lithium-ion battery and heating system developed by Ardica Technology. Ardica's Moshi heating system costs another US\$145; the tech connector kit will set you back US\$50.

The three heating elements — one in the midback and two in the front midsection — together weigh less than a 454g. Users can adjust the temperature up to 37°C with a toggle switch on the left front of the jacket. The heating elements can be fully charged in less than three hours, and a charge should last up to eight hours on the lowest heat setting, according to a Mountain Hardware spokeswoman, Paige Boucher.

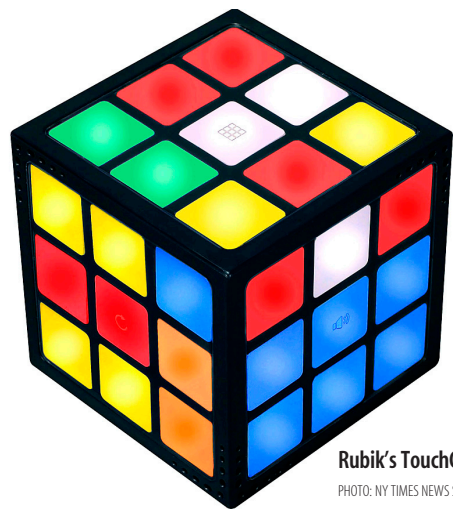
The jacket, designed as a midlayer coat to be worn under a ski jacket or alone in warmer climes, will be available on Thursday.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Mountain Hardwear's insulated jacket with Ardica Moshi Power System.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Rubik's TouchCube.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

RUBIK'S CUBE RETURNS WITH A TOUCH SCREEN AND A HIGHER PRICE TAG

While the amount of technology packed into Rubik's TouchCube is impressive, the big question remains: Would you want to spend more than a few minutes with it before tossing the US\$150 puzzle through a window?

In stores Oct. 18 from Techno Source USA, this is the second electronic edition of the famous puzzle from Techno Source, following last year's Rubik's Revolution. Rather than physically twisting the interlocked mechanical cubes patented by Erno Rubik in 1977, you swipe your finger against one of the cube's capacitive sides to "flip" the colors. There are no moving parts; instead, the multicolor LEDs change color with a flipping sound emitted from an internal speaker, while an accelerometer keeps track of which side is up.

The onboard computer provides hints, or can solve itself. When it is not being used, the cube sits in a charging cradle and lights up, making an ideal night light for a puzzle fanatic.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Hardcover: UK

Tracing the many lives of Anne Frank and her vivid journal

History professor Francine Prose's impassioned exploration of the Anne Frank phenomenon offers readers new insights into the diary's significance

BY JANET MASLIN

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

When Francine Prose taught Anne Frank's diary to a class at Bard College two years ago, one of her students reported getting funny looks from students not in the class. "They acted as if he were assuming some sort of ironic-regressive pose that involved carrying around a children's classic, the equivalent of using his grade school lunch box as an attache case," Prose reports in her new book about Anne (as this book refers to her). Her dogged and impassioned scholarship will dispel many such misimpressions about this subject.

Prose uses her formidable powers of discernment to write incisively about many facets of the Anne Frank phenomenon, from her life itself to the various ways in which it has been willfully distorted. And although Prose jokes she could hear friends opening magazines as she expounded on Anne Frank over the telephone, she turns

her thoughts into a lively and illuminating disquisition.

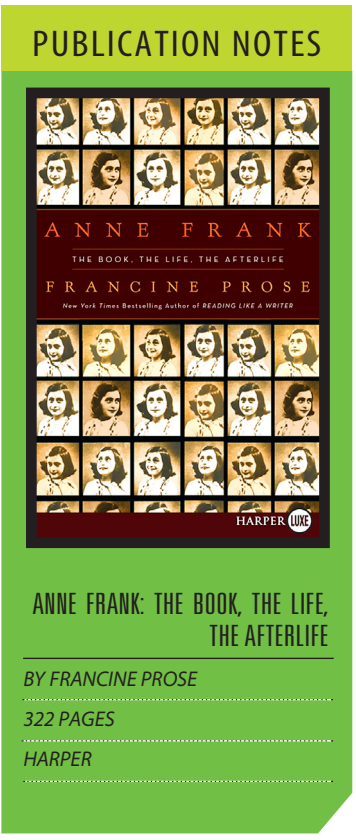
If there is a central point about Anne here, it is that she was a precociously self-aware writer rather than a spontaneous, ingenuous diarist. It takes a real writer, Prose points out, to hide the mechanics of her work and make it sound as if she is simply talking to her readers. Similarly, it takes a gifted explicator to make it sound as if she is presenting her arguments conversationally rather than creating elaborate, research-heavy diatribes to back them up.

Prose's *Anne Frank* has no frills or illusions. It surely does not pretend to be the definitive work on this subject. Instead, it draws upon and synthesizes some of the keenest observations made about Anne by writers like John Berryman, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Judith Thurman and Harold Bloom, seeming to extract the most succinct and provocative thoughts from each one.

Prose's book uses a forthright structure, beginning with a chapter

explaining the circumstances that led Anne to spend more than two years hidden in the secret annex to a building in Amsterdam. She then devotes chapters to the publication of the book; the adaptation of that book into a Broadway play; the further adaptation of it into a Hollywood movie; the way the book has been used in schools; and the way it continues to excite antipathy in some quarters. Above and beyond a normal research effort, Prose has examined the worst of the Internet hate sites, the ones that favor the word hoax or call Anne Frank's book a work of kiddie pornography.

That opening section about Anne's life provides *Anne Frank: The Book, the Life, the Afterlife* with a relatively unsurprising introduction. Yet Prose picks up on the less familiar aspects of Anne's character (a friend's mother would remark that "God knows everything, but Anne knows better"). And she fills in the final months that Anne, nearing 16 and incarcerated at Bergen-Belsen,



could not immortalize on paper. She also fills in blanks about what became of the four other people who shared the annex with Anne, her parents and her sister, Margot. And she emphasizes the heroism of those who helped these Jews survive for as long as they did.

When Prose writes about the book, she pays careful attention to Anne's set of revisions and what they reveal about her choices as a writer. She admires the diary's way of using small household details to reveal each resident's character and underscores how ably Anne transformed those around her into larger-than-life personalities. She goes on to describe the difficulties in getting the diary published, not only in the US (where someone at Alfred A. Knopf rejected it as a "dreary record of typical family bickering, petty annoyances and adolescent emotions") but also in Europe.

Of the 1950 German translation that omitted anti-German references, Prose writes coolly: "This reluctance to offend readers

in a country whose leaders had murdered the book's author was one gauge of the speed at which the diary had already become a commodity that the public might, or might not, choose to buy." In dealing with stage and screen versions of Anne's story, Prose tracks the attempts to make the story happier, fluffier, more dramatic and more "universal." As she puts it, "The adorable was emphasized at the expense of the human, the particular was replaced by the so-called universal, and universal was interpreted to mean American — or in any case, not Jewish" for all kinds of reasons, not least of them commercial ones.

As she provides her blow-by-blow account of the denaturing of the Anne Frank story, Prose remains impressively fair. She believes the book to be a masterpiece written by a complicated artist who died too young. But she by no means clings to the idea that every word of its text should be inviolable, and she recognizes the occasional

improvements that were made.

The deletion of a 13-year-old girl's "bubbly longueurs," she says, must be seen as an improvement even by Anne's most devoted fans.

This seemingly narrow work is an impressively far-reaching critical monograph, an elegant study both edifying and entertaining. In a book full of keen observations and fascinating disputes (the craziest of which involves Meyer Levin, who had no qualms about both reviewing the book in the *New York Times Book Review* and trying to act as its agent), Prose looks in all directions to find noteworthy material. And when she writes of how Anne's diary, which according to a 1996 survey was at one point required reading for 50 percent of schoolchildren in the US, keeps on finding its way "onto the desks of teachers who discover that the book most certainly does not, as they say, teach itself," she underscores the importance of keen analysis. This is a Grade A example of what a smart, precise and impassioned teacher can do.