

THE DAILY REVIEW, TUE., DEC. 13

With a Closed Fist, by Kathy Dobson

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Kathy Dobson

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 12, 2011 UPDATED DECEMBER 12, 2011

This is a wicked, incisive, brutal memoir that moves with breakneck speed from incident to incident, from rats in the toilet to roaches cascading down walls, from lecherous uncles to empty fridges, from angry cops to unforgivably naive social worker students.

Kathy Dobson grew up in Montreal's Point St. Charles, among the hard-core poor, where French kids wearily battle English kids, where racism is casual and deep-rooted, where children are streetwise and aged beyond their years, where the chances of getting out are as astronomical as being hit by lightning.

It's also great fun to read, eliciting belly laughs, snorts and guffaws every few pages. Dobson has clear eyes and a great ability to skewer those well-meaning community organizers who came out of the universities and into the lives of her family, encouraging her mother as a symbol of hope for the neighbourhood even while her six daughters largely raised themselves, feeding themselves on those occasions when there was food, fighting off the perverts and slum landlords of the cold-water flats.

Her descriptions of her relatives are equally merciless at times.

When one of her sisters, overly religious and dramatic, claims she's been deflowered by the devil, Dobson declares she is just too full of herself to take the ordinary route of dirty old men and groping boys like the rest of them.

And their grandmother with her two-sheet toilet-paper rule, listening through the doorway to ensure they comply, who praises Jesus and condemns Catholics and other heathens, but does occasionally serve treats to girls who know how to manipulate her.

There is a father, idealized through his frequent absences as he moves in and out of their lives, objecting to his wife's new association with "communists and socialists," his goal to move them out of the Point discouraged by her love of activism and the attention she is receiving.

It's a great work, illustrating the divide between the classes with the sly observations of an eight-year-old child growing through the pages, these insights drenched in authenticity and moral ambiguity. That ambiguity some may find shocking, but the awe with which the family gathers round to open a stolen Christmas hamper filled with delights oddly outweighs the wrong done to the old man in the building who didn't have the common sense to be home to receive it.

And a good man is one who ensures he beats his wife in privacy, not in front of his nieces.

As their mother gets more and more attention for her speeches and demonstrations, including a profile in the Gazette newspaper, she demands children from the Point get access to Westmount schools, and though she wins the day it is Dobson who bears the weight of the symbolic integration, like the black children who were bused into whites-only schools, only with less fanfare and even less protection.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

The barbed cruelty of the upper middle class students, the snickers in the hallways at her outfits, the branding as white trash, the teachers' expectations of gratitude for their sensitivity over waving school fees and their annoyance when that thankfulness is not forthcoming, all ensure she will fail. Her confusion, her anger and her fists keep her in trouble, she wants out, and yet, when her mother agrees to her dropping out, she knows that this acquiescence may well have ended any hopes for a better life.

Moments like this of great sadness come and go through the book, but they don't weigh heavily as Dobson doesn't dwell too long on them and never descends into self-pity, and the humour never stops. Dobson has enormous talent, and we all must be thankful that she did beat the odds and find her way through the maze of deprivation and violence to speak her truths in such a creative and telling book.

Pat Capponi has known poverty and activism and Montreal, and is the author of five works of non-fiction and two mysteries set in the west end of Toronto.