

FINDING PINDER

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On October 16, 2005, finding as I so often do, an opportunity to avoid doing more pressing work, I send a note to a Canadian teaching colleague, Dick Dunlop, at the University of Alberta, expressing appreciation for complimentary remarks he has made about my lawyers and literature website. Dunlop and I exchange several notes, and on November 6, discussing our mutual interest in lawyer writers, Dunlop mentions the name Leslie Pinder. Knowing of my interest in lawyer poets he writes: "I don't know if she writes poetry," but she is, or was, he tells me, "a lawyer in Vancouver" who has written an interesting novel "on a trial involving native title to land, the evidence necessary to prove such title, and how modern courts deal with such largely oral and hearsay evidence. The novel is called *On Double Tracks*." Dunlop sent along a link to a Writers Union of Canada website providing a brief bio of Pinder.

On November 7, 2005, I sent off to the Avenue Victor Hugo Bookshop in Boston for a used copy of *Under the House*, Pinder's first novel¹—"A fine, clean, neat copy with minimal shelf wear; hinges and binding tight, paper white. A near fine dust jacket with slight edge wear. First Edition." The book arrives; I have no idea what to expect (where to begin)(where reading Pinder might take me). To take up with a new author is a small step into the unknown.² But this unknown, unlike some, has recognizable shapes and forms. I'm dealing with a book, an author. No travel to Papua New Guinea necessary.

Under the House arrives. I don't know where I might have started the novel. There's a dustjacket photo of Pinder (by Pat Higinbotham). She doesn't look at all, in this photo, like a woman who has been "a courtroom lawyer" since 1977. But then, how would I know what such a woman might look like?

A few pages into the novel, I read: "Time in her life was liquid, moving between stone thoughts in underground places." Stone and images of

¹ Leslie Hall Pinder, *UNDER THE HOUSE* (New York: Random House, 1986).

² There's more pleasure than one might think in "finding" an unknown author who labors in obscurity, a writer who crafts books and poetry we "discover."

stone can be found throughout Pinder's work; her collection of linked poems is titled *35 Stones*.³ Reading Pinder, as I've gone on to do, there are so many references to stone in her work, that I now find stone in everything I read. Maybe I should collect the stone in poems, present it to Pinder as a gift for what she gives the reader. I don't know Pinder; she's undoubtedly a cautious woman, leery of strangers. After all, she's a lawyer.

On the same day I ordered *Under the House*, I sent away for a "signed" copy of *On Double Tracks*—"Hardback with dust wrapper. Fine/Fine." Bookland, in Seattle, sends off the book promptly, but *Under the House* arrives first. The biographical information provided on the dustjacket confirms that Pinder is a "courtroom lawyer"; it's the kind of information that some author's do not readily reveal. Do you really want your reader to know that you are a lawyer? When I first picked up *Under the House*, it was undoubtedly this biographical information, sketchy as it was, that first attracted my attention, and the gothic, Edward Hopper-ish house portrayed on the dustjacket cover.⁴ I may not, at least then, have read the dustjacket description of *Under the House*:

Under the House marks the debut of a stunning new talent who combines considerable literary power with a strong narrative gift. It is the story of the Rathbones, a strange, withdrawn family that doesn't talk to outsiders and doesn't talk to each other. No one understands how S.D., the patriarch, got elected mayor or built up the family wealth. Kathryn, his wife, is oddly elusive, even with her children. Stanley, the older son, is a brute and a bully consumed by ambition. Isabel, the older daughter; has left home under mysterious circumstances. Clarence, the youngest son, stammers. And finally there is Maude, by far the youngest, who feels that there is something peculiar about her that no one will tell her.

The events are seen largely through the eyes of Maude and of Evelyn, the illegitimate daughter of the woman Stanley marries, who is dragged into the Rathbone family against her will. They center on three occasions: the family gathering summoned by S.D. to hear his will; the second gathering at his funeral some years later; and the subsequent court trial Stanley brings against Maude, in which the terrible secret that has been consuming the family all these years finally begins to emerge.

³ Leslie Hall Pinder, *35 STONES* (Vancouver: Lazarus Publications, 1982)

⁴ Jacket illustration: Deborah Jones. Jacket design: Robert Aulicino.

Lawyers do not figure prominently in the book, and the court trial, while important to the novel, occupies too little of the novel to recommend it as reading in my lawyers and literature course. I confess that much of my reading, especially fiction, turns out to be a “search” for stories that I can read with my students. I’m rarely successful in actually finding anything for use in the course, but there is often, in this kind of pedagogical driven search, some real discoveries; I’ve found a many good lawyer writers and novelists,⁵ and hundreds of lawyer poets.⁶

The reading of *Under the House* is underway, and I marvel that a Vancouver lawyer of so many years can craft such a fine first novel. *Under the House* is a compelling story, with skillfully drawn complex characters; a novel in which Pinder does no more than hint at her legal background, but her literary skills are obvious. The novel sweeps me up into a whirlwind story, and carries me aloft (and along) by more good dialogue than any first novel I’ve ever read.⁷ Margaret Atwood says of the novel: “A haunting first novel by a writer of great talent and sensitivity. It treats a difficult theme with humanity and admirable complexity.”⁸

Somewhere in the reading of *Under of the House*, Bookland, from its post office box address in Seattle, sends me a “fine/fine”—“signed first edition” of Pinder’s *On Double Tracks*. When the book arrives, I find it has been previously owned by Eileen Beck; and, it has that same fetching photograph that graces the dustjacket of *Under the House*.

⁵ For example, most recently, I chanced upon the work of Andrew Pyper. Pyper, like Pinder, is a Canadian. He was born and raised in Statford, Ontario. He received an undergraduate and master’s degree in English literature from McGill University in Montreal, and his law degree from the University of Toronto. His first novel, *Lost Girls* (Delacorte Press, 2000) is a wild rip of a novel, featuring a young defense lawyer named Bartholomew Christian Crane who defends a man accused of killing two “lost girls.” I recommend it. Pyper is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Kiss Me* (Harper Perennial/Canada, 1996), where Pyper first demonstrates some fine edgy writing. As the book jacket blurb has it, Pyper is “eminently readable,” and indeed he is.

⁶ See James R. Elkins, *The Remnants of a Lost and Forgotten Library: On Finding the Lawyer Poets*, 30 *Legal Stud. F.* 1 (2006).

⁷ The lawyer novelist, George Higgins, was acclaimed for his writing of dialogue. I’ve not read all of Higgins work, but enjoyed his lawyer novels featuring Jerry Kennedy: *KENNEDY FOR THE DEFENSE* (1980); *PENANCE FOR JERRY KENNEDY* (1985); *DEFENDING BILLY RYAN* (1992); *SANDRA NICHOLS FOUND DEAD* (1996).

⁸ Atwood’s description of *Under the House* is, admittedly, a dustjacket blurb, but as the author of a blurb or two, I’d like to think there is some possibility that in some instances they are as accurate and honest as they are eye-catching. (I can’t say that I much care for the word—blurb. I’d like to think, someone, someday will invent an attractive replacement.)

What I find in *On Double Tracks* is a novel so stunning that it will make me a devotee of Pinder's work for life.

From the opening paragraph of *On Double Tracks*: "Something was lifting. Megan only sensed the change, the way an animal would, her mind still absorbed in her work; and then gradually she raised her head and looked at the window." Megan Striclan is a lawyer. This is a lawyer in fiction written from the inside out.⁹ For a man looking, as I so often do, for lawyers in fiction that will rouse the souls of my students, it's not going to get any better than this.

Forty years ago, the land of Chief Akwaw's Band, a place of ancient dreams and prophecies, was taken away by the Canadian Federal Crown. Lawyer Megan Striclan is moved to defend the Indians' bid to reclaim the land, elderly Theodore Selbie is to be Judge. From the outset of the trial things start to go badly for Megan, and a disturbing level of confrontation builds up. Why is Theodore so hostile towards her, and why is he so unsettled by the need to examine evidence from the past? What is it about the Indians' case that provokes such a passionate response in Megan? Only by back-tracking on their respective childhoods does it become clear that what is being enacted in court merely brushes the surface of a wider and more haunting personal drama.¹⁰

The novel begins with the opening days of the Indian land claims trial, and no legal reader of the novel can avert their gaze as Megan Striclan and Judge Theodore Selbie engage in a confrontation that blows in upon the courtroom like a tornado. Striclan and Selbie are both quite fascinating; this is a novel with two characters so intent, so captivatingly drawn, that we read in unsettled amazement as characters, world-views, and worlds collide. Pinder, in *On Double Tracks*, has produced an exquisite work of legal fiction.

In the middle weeks of November, 2005, reading Pinder's novels, *Under the House* and *On Double Tracks*, I try to figure out who this woman might be, how I might express my regard for her work. This business of approaching strangers, even when you're bearing the gift of appreciation, can be tricky. A writer good enough to have her first novel published by

⁹ I am reminded here of a line from Pinder's *Under the House*, where Pinder has a young woman musing: "I know. I am doing my usual trick. Being rational. What else can I do? There are bones in the sun and in the earth. I am full of regret. But I do exist." *Under the House*, at 180.

¹⁰ Editor, and/or, author's summary description, prefatory page (and dustjacket).

Random House may require more than an admiring fan letter. But what? Maybe an email. An unanswered email goes down better than a letter to which one expects more than he is likely to get. But even a chatty email presents problems. I've got no experience in trying to disguise a fan letter as a reader's thoughtful response to an author's novels. Novelists, by all manner of reasons, live in a world apart. Novels arrive on my shore as encoded messages in a bottle (admittedly, they require rather large bottles). *What am I to say to Leslie Pinder?* I don't have a clue. "Dear Ms. Pinder: Read your novels. Just loved them. Can we be friends?"

I ponder over this problem with Pinder and her novels. Maybe what I need is something to give her. But the only thing I've got, that might conceivably be of interest, would be to offer to publish some of her poetry in *LSF*. Dick Dunlop mentioned she might be a poet. If she turns out to be a poet, a good one, I'll have something to say—a man bearing gifts.

The dustjacket of *Under the House* notes that Pinder is the author of *35 Stones*. A visit to OCLC (the library holdings database), and there it is: *35 Stones* "35 poems—each printed on a card" (Vancouver: Lazara Publications). So, now, I have it: Leslie Hall Pinder is a poet. Only two libraries hold copies of the 35 Pinder-poems-on-cards (Simon Fraser University and the Bibliothèque et Archives-Canada) and these Canadian institutions are unlikely to lend such a work to a reader in the United States. But, I've gotten close enough to Pinder's work now to know that I might have something to offer, something more tangible than the gauzy notion of friendship, but I can't be sure of how close, and exactly what I've got to offer, until I see the poems. So, it's off to abebooks.com and I'm in luck. November 26, 2005: *35 Stones* ("35 postcards, each with a portion of the entire poem. 1 of 50.") \$35.00. Serendipity Books, Berkeley, California. "Approximate Shipping Speed: 5-14 business days." Looking back, I'm surprised I didn't have *35 Stones* sent by express overnight mail. But I didn't; no reason to expect or hope that Leslie Pinder would be a lawyer poet who I could publish. Yes, the novels have been quite good, but can Pinder do anything remotely in her poems what she has been able to do in the novels?

With a modicum of unshored faith in Pinder's poetry, I find a bookstore in Canada that has *35 Stones*, not in the OCLC-listed postcards version, but a printed sheet: *35 Stones* (signed). What I find at Purpora Books, 6540 E. Hastings Street, Burnaby, British Columbia—\$20—is: "Single sheet of beige paper, 9" x 24", printed both sides, folded vertically three times to make eight pages. Sunned along the folds and a small light

brown spot on rear page. Poem in 35 numbered segments; cover art by Claire Kujundzic. Inscribed by author on front cover ‘Happy Stones—many more than 35— Love Leslie’” Good luck indeed.¹¹

With both postcards and printed sheet versions of Pinder’s *35 Stones* on their way from Berkeley and Burnaby, Canada, I venture my first communication with THE AUTHOR. Knowing that she is a poet provides an opening, but I don’t know how wide that opening will be until I see the poems. But, I’ve seen the novels, and in finding *35 Stones* (both versions), I’m emboldened to establish contact with Pinder: *if I can find her*.

November 26, 2005: With no hope that I’ll find the right/eloquent words (and non-fan-letter-tone) to write a fit letter, I search for an email address for Pinder. The one I find doesn’t look promising, but for some reason, that makes writing her a bit easier. The email reads:

A colleague in Canada, knowing of my long-standing interest in lawyers and literature, made reference to your novels, *Under the House*, and *On Double Tracks*. I acquired both, read them, and was rather stunned by the writing, by the stories, and by the simple fact that I’ve been reading legal fiction seriously now for some years (everything from literary fiction to legal thrillers) and have never seen reference to your work in U.S. legal/academic circles.

Since you are probably accustomed to fan letters, I’ll spare you (at least for now) trying to describe what I think you’ve accomplished in these novels. I only wish, as a reader, there were a half-dozen more of them—but then, you do have this other life you’ve been living as a lawyer.

I say nothing to Pinder in this first note about her poetry, but I do want to say something more than that I’ve read her novels and have become

¹¹ Later, July 4, 2006 to be exact, again from Purpora Books, Burnby, B.C., I found another set of the cards version of *35 Stones*: “36 postcards (title page and 35 numbered cards each with a segment of the poem ‘35 Stones’). The front of the title page card is sunned on left and right sides and has a faint sticker shadow top right. Undated, but the broadside of the same poet was published in 1982 and presumably this would have been issued simultaneously. Art by Claire Kujundzic. Unusual.” The price—\$12.50—a great bargain. For some reason, portents of my friendship with Pinder wafting about, I acquire, from Prospero’s Fine Books, in Phoenix, Arizona, a signed copy of *On Double Tracks*: “March / 90 For Allan—To write—all best wishes Love Leslie”

My signed copy of *Under the House*, listed for sale by Werdz Quality Used Books, 337 Maplewood Ave., Winnipeg, Canada, was also acquired on July 4, 2006. I’m not a collector of “signed” books but then, nothing about Pinder is of the usual sort.

Maybe I should corner the market in Pinder-signed first editions!

a fan. I need to give Pinder something to do! A reason to require a response. So, I ask Pinder if she will allow me to use a 3-page excerpt from her novel, *On Double Tracks*, in my lawyers and literature course. In the excerpt, lawyer Megan Striclan interviews a young woman who is seeking a position at her law firm. The interview, an encounter of a weary insider and an exuberant newcomer, is both poignant and sad, and in this single vignette, Pinder's skills as a literary writer are in full view. I have in mind teaching the excerpt from Pinder's novel, with a strikingly similar interview in a Lowell Kome story, "The Cornucopia of Julia K."¹² How exactly all of this is supposed to help me establish a working relationship with Pinder is not at all clear.

My e-mail to Pinder is returned: undeliverable.

December is a busy month: I have final examinations to monitor, student papers to read, Christmas with my family. I would probably have forgotten about Leslie Hall Pinder, and did exactly that for a few weeks. But then, with the arrival of *35 Stones*, which I'd ordered on the same day I sent Pinder the errant email, I knew that my search for Leslie Pinder must resume.

It was early March, 2006, before I began thinking about Pinder again. Who knows where the time goes? Who can fathom what new projects are undertaken, while old ones get filed away, and of those that get filed, which will be resurrected? Pinder's absence aggravates me as the images of her characters, her writing, follows me into a new semester. One evening, in yet another Google Search, I learn that Pinder has been involved in a writing program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, so I contact the director of the program: "I am trying to find contact information (email or mailing address) for Leslie Hall Pinder. I would like to contact her about publishing some of her work. If you could pass along her email or mailing address, or in the alternative, pass along this email to her, I would greatly appreciate it." A man bearing gifts.

A week later, March 15, 2006, I get a brief, but encouraging note from Pinder saying, in brief, you've inquired about my whereabouts, "... here I am."

¹² "The Cornucopia of Julia K.," in Lowell B. Kome, *THE LEGAL FICTION OF LOWELL B. KOMIE* 69-76, at 75-76 (Chicago: Swordfish/Chicago, 2005).

So, that's how it began. There's a good deal more to my Leslie Pinder story: correspondence both sporadic and energetic, packages of books, a bouquet of flowers (Pinder to Elkins)(quite lovely); Pinder's new residence, a broken water heater, the illness of her mother, summer efforts by Pinder to get to the Internet in the small town on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia via a 16 foot zodiac. But we get ahead of ourselves. This story grows out of and into Pinder's writings, poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, a body of work that speaks quite well for itself. .

Here is the Leslie Hall Pinder work . . .

. . . our correspondence

. . . to follow.