

What we have here is a failure to communicate

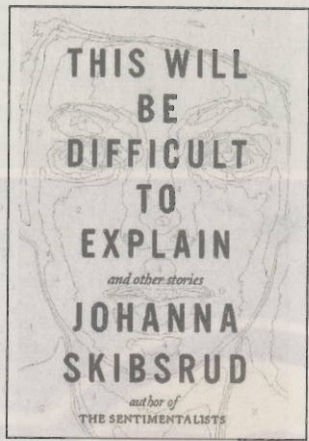
IAN MCGILLIS
FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

Coming as it does hard on the heels of her Giller-winning debut novel *The Sentimentalists*, Johanna Skibsrud's first collection of stories is sure to get a lot more attention than most such books could ever hope for. There's more to that than a writer's sudden fame, though: *The Sentimentalists'* strengths felt open-ended, liable to go off in any number of future directions, and here is the first chance to see what those might be.

The title of the eponymous story, *This Will Be Difficult to Explain*, is well chosen to represent the whole, since nearly every story hinges on a failure to communicate. Skibsrud shows how whole lives can turn on a misunderstood comment, an ambiguous choice of words, a language barrier.

The *Limit* presents that idea in concentrated form. An estranged father takes his 13-year-old daughter for a drive in the Wisconsin countryside, straining with growing desperation to establish some kind of emotional bond in the short time he has with her: "All her answers come out sounding like he is a fool to have to ask in the first place, as if of course there would be only one answer to that, and everyone would know it but him."

French Lessons, so short that it's hard to write about without giving too much away, is a finely observed tableau of an American woman caring for an elderly, blind widow in a



REVIEW

This Will Be Difficult To Explain and Other Stories by Johanna Skibsrud (Hamish Hamilton, 169 pages, \$28); and **Once You Break a Knuckle** by D.W. Wilson (Hamish Hamilton, 246 pages, \$32)

Paris apartment, hobbled by the fact that she can't express anything in the past tense.

In terms of literal ground covered, *Once You Break a Knuckle* offers a stark contrast to the bi-continental Skibsrud.

D.W. Wilson sticks in his debut collection to the towns and forests of his native Kootenay Valley in British Columbia. It's no random choice, as confinement and a lack of options define the lives Wilson portrays.

The book's title forms the first half of a folk maxim that ends "... you will break it again," and it's soon evident how all that knuckle-breaking happens: Wilson is describing a violent culture, a cycle where sons might start as rebels but soon enough find themselves making the same bad



Johanna Skibsrud takes part in **WordFest**, running Oct. 11 through 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and wordfest.com.

life decisions their fathers did. Beer looms large in this world — Kokanee gets mentioned so often it begins to feel like unpaid advertising — as do divorce, boredom, sexual musical chairs, reckless road trips and run-ins with the ever-present "welfare hicks."

The overall tone isn't as gloomy as such a summary might imply, though. Wilson is very strong on the black humour of competitive father-son banter and the thin line between comical macho bravado and vulnerability; he can convey with a rare immediacy both the transgressive thrill of a punch-up and exactly how it feels to punch and be punched.

Where this collection runs into trouble is in the overlapping relationship between many of the stories, a device that far too often crosses the line between reinforcing echo and mere repetition.

Recurring imagery that might be fine in stories read over a long period — cutesy slogans on coffee mugs and T-shirts are a particular favourite of Wilson's — quickly becomes an irritant when concentrated in book form.