

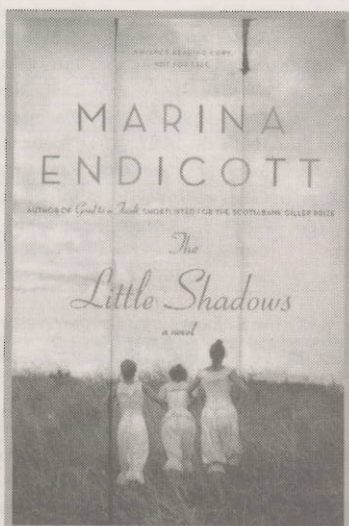
Vaudeville takes centre stage in *Little Shadows*

ROB ALEXANDER BOW VALLEY

Long before computers, television and MP3 players, vaudeville, with its wide array of entertainment, was the only show in town.

Some of the names from that era – like the great Buster Keaton and comedic duo Laurel and Hardy – have persisted despite the overwhelming change in how we enjoy entertainment, from the ever-present vaudeville theatres to digital media. Even today, clips of Buster Keaton in action on YouTube continue to be a marvel of physical comedy.

And it is this permanence of vaudeville, in all its glory and warts, that Canadian author Marina Endicott tapped into to tell her newest novel, *The Little Shadows*, published by Doubleday Canada, which tells the story of the Avery sisters, Aurora, Clover and Bella, and their mother, Flora, as they struggle to make it big in vaudeville.



From the beginning of *The Little Shadows*, Endicott proves why she has been nominated for the Giller Prize; Canada's top writing award, not once, but twice now and shortlisted last year. She did not, however, make it onto this year's shortlist.

Her beautifully written story moves quickly as the characters are dragged through a wild, maddening world that brings both despair and joy, drawing the numerous threads together to a satisfying end that – like every good book should – will leave readers feeling disappointed because there's no more to come.

But she begins slowly, gently drawing readers into the story right from the first sentence in the one-page Overture where she states, "A summer evening. Moths dance in the lights outside the opera house." She sets the story in place before introducing the fast pace which befits the ever-present anxiety and uncertainty the girls and their mother face on the vaudeville circuit.

Endicott, author of *Good to a Fault* and *Open Arms*, came at vaudeville with fresh eyes and a growing curiosity that led her to begin collecting

material over a number of years.

"I was surprised by vaudeville and I was surprised by the level of skill and I really loved reading the accounts of how they worked, the incredible discipline and just physically the skill we see in those old films of Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy and how acute their understanding of physical comedy was. One of the challenges I found about writing about it was trying to convey that physicality in text," Endicott said in an interview with the *Outlook*.

With that material at hand and the rich opportunities the vaudeville world offered in terms of creating a story, Endicott set out to write a coming of age story from the perspective of girls.

"I wanted to look at what the girls experienced and what their experience would have been if they could have spoken frankly. In those days they couldn't," she said.

She based many of her characters on real vaudeville stars, drawing inspiration from their lives and even their photographs and, in the case of Endicott's vaudeville comedians East and Verrell, she used actual vaudeville jokes.

"All of the jokes East and Verrell tell are genuine antiques. I've reworked those routines so they could work on the page," she said.

Buster Keaton, meanwhile, who began performing physical comedy with his parents at the age of three, became the model for Nando Dent of the Knockabout Ninepins.

Endicott does that nicely, creating scenes that are both real and clear, even though they are remarkably complex.

And just like the acts themselves, *The Little Shadows* is fun, even in the darker parts of the story.

"I can't tell you how much fun I had with it. It's a good thing I had to get the book done or I'd still be wallowing around in it, just dreaming about vaudeville," she said.

Endicott will be one of the authors participating in the Friday Night Showcase (Oct. 14) at Vertigo Theatre Centre, Playhouse in Calgary

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