

Some Great Thing

by Colin McAdam. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books; April 1, 2004:408 pp

Reviewed by John Steil

This is a novel. And, strangely enough, it's about a planner. There've been novels about developers – as an example, Tom Wolfe's Charlie Croaker, the Atlanta land developer in *A Man in Full*, who ended up as an evangelist. Ayn Rand created her heroic architect, Howard Roarke, the protagonist in *The Fountainhead*. Now, at last, Colin McAdam's *Some Great Thing* gives planners an opportunity to look in the literary mirror to examine themselves and their relationship with developers.

Simon Struthers, a planner bureaucrat, shares the stage with Jerry McGuinty in the stereotypical dichotomy of planner versus developer. Jerry overshadows at the start; his story is first person, straightforward, and reflects the motivation of a driven developer. Jerry is larger than life in many ways, starting out as a plasterer and, in his words has built “thirteen neighbourhoods, five thousand roofs, thirty thousand outside walls... I have covered five thousand acres with my own creations.” He's a believable character.

From the other perspective, the story of Simon the planner is told in third person. At the age of 38 and the son of a cabinet minister, he has just been appointed Director of Design and Land Use in an agency full of “people who could capture the world in a memo.” As we all know planners just like Simon, so does McAdam understand the planner who “changed memos from stiff syntactic graveyards into cloistered graveyards of the Word.”

Simon has his Dreambook – all the projects imagined up by the Division that were never turned into reality. McAdam writes “if you are involved in making policy you will know that no matter how active or industrious you may be there is always a sense of having done nothing in the end.” Jerry has the opposite perspective; for him, at the start, it's about plasterboard. Similarly, as planners, we need to question ourselves about just what we've accomplished – or allowed to be accomplished. Simon is motivated by the dream of ‘some great thing’ and I encourage planners to keep this as a minimum target.

McAdam weaves the planning perspective into the elements of plot, working the interplay and anticipation of an eventual confrontation between Simon the planner and Jerry the developer. They are people, not stereotypes; very real. And interesting. You could not arbitrarily change the characters to other professions; the novel's plot rests on the tension between planning and development.

Rather than an academic tome, this novel is about planners in both process and context. While it focuses on what makes this particular planner and developer tick, it hits close to home on many counts. It's a piece of fiction, yes, yet I see hints of some of the clients and planners I have worked with over the years.

These characters, Simon and Jerry, are people we know; we have worked with them, we have processed their applications. They are not stereotypes, and this highlights the realism.

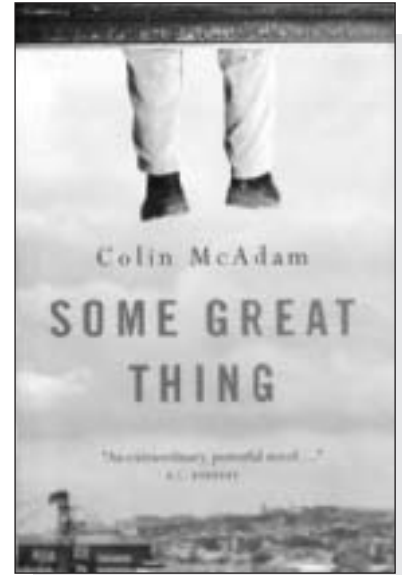
Simon – sex on the desk, “but one forgets with all the process.” The senior planner – “I think we should make a decision ... not making a decision gets us nowhere.” McAdam puts the thematic plot clearly in the social context, including the boss' wife's daughter, the Irish drunk, and young Jerry with the Mohawk haircut who runs away. Not everyone will appreciate some aspects of this novel – Kathleen is a bit tiring as Jerry's drunk wife – but it is

not really different from the way many bestsellers depict life's realities. And that is what is so exciting about this book. Planners are real people and planning is driven by desire.

For planners, this novel should promote reflection about the planner's roles and responsibilities from a perspective different than traditional planning theory. Besides, it's more fun than any textbook on planning. There is dirt, some unethical behaviour, and personalities.

As McAdam's blurb states, he is a Canadian who has moved around the world, acquiring degrees from Toronto, McGill, and Cambridge. *Some Great Thing* is his first novel. While he doesn't list a summer job in a planning department on his list of accomplishments, he is brilliant in his perceptions of the intricacies and details of Canadian bureaucracy, planners, the development game, and their inter-relationships. The early part of the novel, and the least successful part, focuses on the non-planning side, mostly about Jerry's life. Through this section, the plot drifts a bit and it is somewhat hard to see where it's going, but soon shifts into the idioms that we need to examine.

I would suggest that CIP credit some hours of professional development time to anyone reading this great Canadian novel about planning. I have even recommended it to my non-planner friends, not just because one of the main characters is a planner, but also because it is an excellent Canadian novel. It's about very different people with very different motivations and how they, ultimately, shape the city. ■



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