

## Tracing the Web: House of Anansi's Spiderline Editions

Stephen Cain

Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2000

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc125\\_1art07](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc125_1art07)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cain, S. (2000). Tracing the Web:: House of Anansi's Spiderline Editions. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 25(1), 111–130.

Article abstract

Established in 1969, the House of Anansi Press's Spiderline series represents a unique moment in Canadian publishing history. At no time previously had a Canadian publisher attempted to release the work of so many unknown and untried novelists simultaneously and also emphasize the fact that these were first, and perhaps not perfect, novels. Anansi's goals for the Spiderline series were to let new voices be heard, to give first-time novelists a chance at publication, and to get it done quickly by producing each of the Spiderlines with the same Spartan cover and identical typeface. All of the first five writers published — Peter Such, Russell Marois, Matt Cohen, John Sandman, and Pierre Gravel — were white, male, and no older than thirty. With its diverse collection of authors, experimental styles, and youthful enthusiasm for the new, the local, and the bilingual the original Spiderline books were the vision of Dennis Lee and David Godfrey at a time of great patriotism and literary expansion. The decision to reintroduce the Spiderline series in the late 1990s can be viewed as an attempt to regain Anansi's earlier status as a "progressive" and unique publishing enterprise.

# Tracing the Web: House of Anansi's Spiderline Editions

STEPHEN CAIN

FROM OUR PRESENT PERSPECTIVE it is tempting to view 1969 as the golden year of the Canadian novel. Two years after the Centennial, there arose a great surge in the quantity — and quality — of novels published in Canada. In this single year, important, and soon to be canonical, novels by Margaret Laurence (*The Fire-Dwellers*), Margaret Atwood (*The Edible Woman*), and Robert Kroetsch (*The Studhorse Man*) were published by major presses, while innovative and experimental novels by bpNichol (*Two Novels*) and Graeme Gibson (*Five Legs*) were printed by two emerging small presses in Toronto: Coach House and House of Anansi. Of the two latter publishers, it was Anansi that was beginning to come into prominence as an important publisher of first fiction, while Coach House concentrated on poetry titles and the exploration of fine printing and book design. Two years previously, David Godfrey's first collection, *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola*, had launched Anansi's efforts in fiction, causing a minor scandal due to its title with "the giant beverage corporation [making] legal noises about infringement of its trademark" (MacSkimming 5). No fiction was published in 1968, but in 1969 Anansi once again turned to novels, publishing not only the aforementioned *Five Legs* and Ray Smith's *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada*, but a series of five first novels by Canadians under the age of thirty-one, produced through the collective imprint of Spiderline Editions.

The Spiderline series represents a unique moment in Canadian publishing history. At no time previously had a Canadian publisher attempted to release the work of so many unknown and untried novelists simultaneously and also emphasize the fact that these were first, and perhaps not perfect, novels. As Dennis Lee writes in the introduction to the Spiderline Editions, "The only criterion is that their first novel be a good one, and likely to lead to still better" (Inside cover blurb: all editions). Adding to this unique phenomenon is that fact that one of the five nov-

els, Pierre Gravel's *A Perte de Temps*, was published in the original French, with only a select glossary at the bottom of each page to help its intended audience of English readers. Even without considering this experiment in bilingualism, an examination of the Spiderline Editions and their authors, along with the critical response to these texts — both contemporary and present — provides readers with a remarkable insight into the literary climate of post-Centennial Canada.

It is difficult to separate a discussion of the publications of House of Anansi from, if not nationalism, a concern for national identity. As former Anansi editor James Polk writes, Anansi was “instrumental in shaping Canada’s sense of literary identity after Expo 67” (“Anansi” 33); or, as Douglas Fetherling notes in his memoirs, *Travels by Night*: “During the Centennial and for a couple of years afterwards, Anansi was at the forefront of a movement that it both helped to create and then gave voice to” (108). But it is not merely in retrospect that Anansi is viewed as being concomitant with a growing sense of national and literary identity; only a few months after its inception, co-founder David Godfrey, in an interview in *Canadian Forum*, went on record to say that “there are certain things within the Canadian way of life that are worth examining and they won’t be examined if all the writing comes from America and England” (107). Speculating that “there’s not a five per cent Canadian representation” in bookstores, but that “about two per cent is pretty generally true,” Godfrey goes on to state that his interest in publishing is “communication among the intellectuals in various parts of the country” (107). Godfrey, however, is careful to avoid the sense that Anansi has a “nationalist” agenda, at least in comparison to how nationalism was developing in the United States at that time:

I don’t like what’s happening in the States: it seems to me that they have identified and propounded a kind of nationalism, economic nationalism, whose design, stated or not, is to impose this mold upon the whole world....

... I would be quite happy to see less nationalism in the world, to see Canada without an identity as long as it’s not a matter of giving up a beaver skin for a tiger skin. It’s sort of an ‘anti-identity’ thing because I want to see what we’ve got here and I don’t want it to be what they’ve got in the States. (107)

It was, therefore, not to be an ideology developed outside of day-to-day experience and then propagated to the populace through various state apparatus, but a sense of identity that would develop “naturally,” or at least

spontaneously, by Canadians telling their own stories to other Canadians. Anansi — as a small and independent publisher — would provide the forum and medium for them to do so.

While Godfrey believed that his press had made some headway toward this goal with the publication of several books of poetry — Dennis Lee's *Kingdom of Absence*, George Jonas's *The Absolute Smile* and a reprint of Atwood's *The Circle Game* (originally from Raymond Souster's Contact Press) — Godfrey felt that what was really needed in Canada were new voices in fiction: "The real need is in fiction for *parti-pris* novels, first novels of young people who have a different way of seeing things or putting it down or something interesting to say" (107). In the next year, Godfrey's vision would be realized with the advent of the Spiderline Editions.

If Pierre Berton's recent account of this period in Canadian history, *1967: The Last Good Year*, is accurate in its depiction of the exuberance and national pride expressed in the last years of the 1960s, one might find Godfrey's aspirations and proclamations in the *Canadian Forum* interview unsurprising. Indeed one would expect that many of the small presses formed post-1967 — Talon, Oberon and Sono Nis — would be patriotic in character, and be devoted to the expansion and promotion of Canadian fiction and poetry. Fetherling, however, argues that many of the other small presses were "personal vehicles for their editors" (109), and documents from that time period often support this view. A common point of comparison is to the other major small publisher operating in Toronto at that time, Coach House Press.

The aforementioned *Canadian Forum* interview provides a striking contrast between the goals of the two presses, especially by considering the manner in which Coach House founder Stan Bevington answers the same questions posed to Godfrey. When asked what each of the publishers would do with more money, Godfrey mentions the first-novels project and "a social action series," while Bevington answers, "with more money I could devote more of my time to making books" (107). This division, between those who wished to explore a Canadian identity and act as a force for social change, and those who "just" wanted to make finely-designed texts which would bring "poetry and books to the level of the rest of the arts in exploring media" (108), is certainly quite apparent here, and remained so as each of these presses evolved over the next decade.

This distinction between House of Anansi and Coach House also features prominently in an article on "the underground press" in the *Toronto Telegram* one year later. In his piece, Marq deVilliers notes that

Anansi is more concerned with content than design. In exaggerated self-mockery, Lee says ‘we wouldn’t care if every second page were upside down as long as the content were right.’ But with the Coach House the priorities are different.

[Bevington]:‘We want better quality, fine color work. We want to do things that haven’t been done before. Our new press is slow but it’ll produce real quality.’ (1)

As a full-page spread in a prominent newspaper, this report was important in promoting both Coach House and Anansi, but it also provided a forum for Lee to state Anansi’s *raison d’être*. Again, proliferation of an undefined nationalism is at the forefront:

Dave and I are urban nationalists, in the sense that we recognize that men are public beings as well as private beings and should be conscious of the kind of society they’re creating. I am not so much calling for a particular kind of society as saying that people in my country don’t seem to have this public sense at all. That’s one reason for Anansi. (1)

This article also mentions, for the first time, what Lee and Godfrey saw as a major flaw in the current state of Canadian publishing: “the inevitable time lag between submission of a manuscript to a publisher and eventual publication — often two years or more. ‘This really used to bother us,’ says Lee. ‘Particularly for young writers this time can be critically important’” (1). This would, of course, become one of the primary reasons for the creation of the Spiderlines Editions; as Lee writes in his introduction to the series,

Some years, you can count on the fingers of one hand the new novelists who get published in Canada. Because of this first-novel bottleneck, many talented writers seem to freeze after one book, and the dynamic by which writer and reader develop together is paralysed. (Inside cover blurb: all editions)

It appears that Godfrey and Lee had taken the comments of Alden Nowlan, in his 1968 review of Godfrey’s *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola* in *Canadian Forum*, to heart and, in conceiving of the Spiderlines, had begun to act upon his criticism: “the important thing is that having this book published will make it easier for Godfrey to write more and, no doubt, better stories. Most young writers feel an emotional, almost physical need, from time to time, to see their work in *books*” (Nowlan 282). Letting new voices be heard, giving first-time novelists a chance at publication, and getting it done quickly were all rationales for the Spiderline

series but, as Nowlan also mentions in his review, “even during the current wild and wonderful upsurge in publishing in this country,” what was needed was “better distribution and lower prices” (282). By producing each of the Spiderlines with the same spartan cover, identical typeface, and keeping the production costs low by “ganging the printing on a web press” (MacSkimming 12), Anansi was able to release the five novels at the price of \$1.95 each (or \$5 hardcover) at a time when most novels were priced between \$4.95 and \$6.95. As for promotion and distribution, the act of releasing five novels at once — accompanied by a press release stating Anansi’s “one modest aim: to change the climate for Canadian fiction by letting the best writers get into print, find an audience and get on with their next book” (Lee qtd. in Richmond 7) — garnered the press much media attention resulting in reviews and large features in the major Canadian newspapers, and in several periodicals including *Maclean’s* and *Time*.

For at least one of the Spiderline Editions, however, there were added rationales for publication — although at least one reason was related to the above concerns, that of time-lag. In the introduction to *A Perte de Temps*, Lee and Godfrey write that

The new novelist of Quebec arises, is discovered, tested out, hammered at, and made known — while we sleep. Five or six years later, if the right translator has received the right grant that year ... we begin, in a distorted and desultory manner, to repeat the pattern of discovery. But we are, inevitably, as a group, to remain five years behind. (n. pag.)

But beyond the mere factor of expediency, Lee and Godfrey also had a “nationalist” agenda behind publishing a novel in French: bilingualism. Between 1963 and 1969, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism had studied the issue of bilingualism in Canada, and in 1969, the Official Languages Act was adopted, making French and English of equal status in the administration of various levels of government and courts of law. Thus, in the year of this act, House of Anansi undertook the civic task of helping to foster the communication between French and English Canada for, even with high-school French courses, Lee and Godfrey felt most of English Canada remained “half-bilingual” (vi). The press therefore acquired Gravel’s French novel but, rather than translate it into English,

The actual text is set in French. Below that, and according to no formal methodology, we have translated — with the assistance of Barbara Kerslake — those words or phrases we thought might give you trouble. (n. pag.)

Thus, with Gravel's novel, Anansi not only attempted to fulfil their mandate of "first-time novelists" with "something interesting to say," but also their philosophy of "urban-national[ism]" and the promotion of "communication among the intellectuals in various parts of the country," particularly between Quebec and English Canada.

But, aside from Gravel, when the Spiderlines were still in the planning stages, Anansi still needed to decide who these first-time novelists would be and, moreover, what voices and perspectives would be represented. It was a strange task for Lee, who was the poetry editor at Anansi, to undertake, especially as Lee had made it clear— in deVilliers's feature on the small press — that it was poetry, not fiction, that was the true voice of young Canadians:

Toronto is fairly crawling with writers. Mostly poets. This is the cultural pattern in Canada — if a young person has something to say he'll usually say it through poetry rather than fiction. In the States the pattern is different. (1)

Nonetheless, sometime in 1968, Lee's editorial interests turned from poetry to prose. Part of this seems a matter of necessity for, in the Spring of 1968, Godfrey had left for France to write a new novel (Fetherling 141) where he would meet Jim Bacque and Roy MacSkimming, with whom he would eventually form New Press (156). In *Making Literary History*, however, MacSkimming suggests that Lee's interests were naturally turning toward fiction after having worked on Gibson's *Five Legs*: "Gibson had been writing the novel for nine years, and Lee worked closely with him, practically moving into his living room to wrestle with the tricky structure and dense texture" (11-12). Certainly one can observe the style of Gibson's first novel — with its non-linear, often stream-of-consciousness narration — having a profound impact on Lee's literary taste. The Anansi fiction style of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which Polk describes as "black comedy, magic realism ... stream of consciousness, myth and fantasy ... notes from underground men and women" ("Anansi" 33), was well underway with Gibson and Smith, and would only become more consolidated with Lee's future choices including George Payerle's *Afterpeople*, Lawrence Garber's *Circuit*, Chris Scott's *Bartleby* and, of course, Lee's selection of the five Spiderline novelists: Peter Such, Russell Marois, Matt Cohen, John Sandman, and Pierre Gravel.

With the exception of Cohen, whom Lee "commissioned" to write a novel (Marchand A2), little record exists of how Lee came to choose these five writers as his Spiderline "team." However, the demographic

they represent, and the style in which they write, is quite telling in terms of Lee's ideology at that time and what he perceived as "Canadian" writing in that period. Of the five, all were under the age of thirty-one, with Such the oldest at thirty, and Sandman and Marois the youngest at twenty-four, at the time of publication. While the priority of the Spiderlines was to publish first-time novelists, an additional part of the criteria was that one had not to have entered the third decade of life; this, at a time when a popular credo was "never trust anyone over 30," is surely no accident, especially when journalist Philip Sykes remarks, in *Macleans's*, that Lee "has just reached the untrustworthy age of 30" himself (111). All of these "best and brightest" novelists also happen to be male — a gender disparity is quite apparent in all of Anansi's publications in the first few years of its inception. Although Atwood would be one of Anansi's best-sellers in both poetry and non-fiction, she appears to be the exception; it is not until the second series of Spiderline books are released in 1970 that a first-time woman novelist appears, Rachel Wyatt. Similarly, although Anansi would publish Marian Engel's second novel and Janis Rapoport's first collection of poetry, not a single woman appears in Anansi's first anthology of Canadian poets, *T.O. Now* (1968), and only one woman is featured in one of its sequels, *Soundings: New Canadian Poets* (1970) — a fact realized, yet poorly justified, by the book's editors, Jack Ludwig and Andy Wainwright: "We don't need Women's Lib to remind us too many of our voices are men's.... Let this book tell those we've failed to reach that it's time we put the world and word together" (n. pag.). With this in mind, it is also unsurprising to find that all of the Spiderline authors are white— Anansi would not publish a black writer until 1971 with Austin Clarke's *When He was Free and Young and He Used to Wear Silks*.

It appears then, that in 1969 to be a young Canadian "with something interesting to say," at least in the vision of House of Anansi, was to be white, male, and no older than thirty. But aside from these shared characteristics, where these five figures differ also demonstrates a remarkable portrait of the perceived Canadian demographic during the late 1960s. Two of the novelists, Marois and Gravel, are Québécois, the other three are from Ontario — no representation of the West Coast, Prairies, or Maritimes (although Vancouver writer George Bowering would be published by Anansi that year). Of the Québécois, one — Marois — is an anglophone Montrealer, the other — Gravel — is a francophone born in Montreal but studying and writing in France. Of the Ontario writers, Sandman and Such resided in Toronto, while Cohen was born in King-



ston. Cohen was the only figure of these three actually born and raised in Canada — Such was born in London, England, but settled in Toronto at the age of 14, while Sandman was an American expatriate, born in New Jersey but coming to “Toronto in 1968 as a landed immigrant” (back cover: *Eating Out*). While perhaps not technically a draft-dodger, Sandman is part of a contingent of Americans who ended up on the steps of Anansi following the publication of Mark Satin’s *Manual for Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada* and through Godfrey’s involvement with the Toronto Anti-Draft Program (MacSkimming 7). These five figures, then, can be viewed as representative of at least five cultural or national backgrounds that Anansi saw as making up the populace of Canada in 1969: a colonial “settler” from the “Mother” country, England; a Jewish writer from the Upper Canada heartland, Kingston; an expatriate American; an Anglophone Montrealer; and a radical Francophone, with ties to both Quebec and the “old world” of France. If one takes this microcosmic conception further, to the point of metaphor, we can view the unity of appearance in the five Spiderline books — all 13.5 cm x 20 cm books with light olive covers, no artwork and identical font — as parallel to the unity achieved through Canadian citizenship. At around the time that the term “cultural mosaic” is becoming common parlance (*Mosaic* magazine, for example, had formed in the Centennial year), it is interesting that this gesture seems to imply that many divergent groups can overcome difference by emphasizing similarities — not only do all the books look the same but, as many of the reviewers at the time noted, “they are almost unanimous in their disregard of conventional forms, particularly linear structure and chronology” (French 17).

But before considering the formal structure of the novels, it is worthwhile, alongside an examination of demographics, to observe the settings of the five books. As might be expected from first-time novelists, all of the writers choose settings which are closely tied to their own biographies. Of the five, Such’s *Fallout* is most concerned with establishing a clear and fully realized setting: the workcamps around the Uranium refineries of Elliot Lake. Such later comments that this setting “grew out of my experiences in the uranium era of the fifties” where he had worked at eighteen years of age (Such, “Preface”). Gravel’s *A Perte de Temps* takes place on and around the streets of his native Montreal, as does Marois’s novel. George Woodcock, in *Matt Cohen and His Work*, comments that *Korsoniloff* “derived a great deal from the author’s experience of university life” (2), the setting of which is Toronto, around the university where Cohen had taken his M.A. in political theory before beginning a teach-

ing career at McMaster University (Woodcock, *MC* 1). Finally, Sandman's *Eating Out*, the only novel not to have a Canadian setting, takes place entirely in a New York diner on Broadway which is, as in the case of Marois, close to his native state, New Jersey.

Although Canadian critics have long since given up the notion that it is mere setting that defines a Canadian novel and, at least since 1974, have challenged the conception that thematic elements make a novel "Canadian," setting and theme were still very powerful concerns for Canadian writers and audiences in 1969. Dennis Duffy, for example, in his review of *Fallout* in *Saturday Night*, writes,

It is the archetypal Canadian novel insofar as such a creature exists: man vs. nature described in non-symbolic terms a reader itches to symbolize. Elliot Lake at the close of the uranium boom, town closing down, people drifting away, the land and the seasons reasserting their power over their violators. (60)

Despite the fact that this quote may characterize audience responses in the early 1970s, as late as 1977 John Moss would write that *Fallout* "can be seen as a paradigm for the entire process of Canadian history" (n. pag.).

However, with the exception of *Fallout*, it is difficult to see how the Spiderline Editions might reflect a Canadian ideology or, at least in terms set out by Lee and Godfrey, succeed in examining those "certain things within the Canadian way of life that are worth examining" ("Small Presses" 107). Certainly Sandman's tale of a botched robbery has little to do with a perceived Canadian identity, unless one considers failing to achieve one's goals a quintessentially Canadian character trait. Similarly, in *The Telephone Pole*, due to the multiple narrative voices and perspectives (from first person to third person to academic footnote), it is difficult to determine what cultural or ideological identity Marois's writing represents, and, even though the novel is set in Montreal, the city remains largely undefined. "Montreal is somehow unreal" is also a comment made in a *Time* magazine review of *A Perte de Temps* — an even more problematic novel in terms of its ability to reflect a "Canadian identity" at that time (Rev. 18). Although that same reviewer would write that the novel "amounts to essential reading for anyone trying to probe the mentality of Quebec's young extremists" (18), and while it is highly praised by those reviewers who read all five novels — particularly by George Woodcock in his reviews in the *Toronto Star* and *Canadian Literature* — how "Canadian" can a novel about FLQ terrorists be? Although it certainly addresses a particular populace in Canada, and recounts events which

concern Canadians across the country, it is quite ironic — and possibly offensive to radical Québécois — to claim that a novel written in French, and about Quebec politics and issues, can be uniformly Canadian. The sense of irony is also increased, however, when one considers that Anansi's gesture of national goodwill by advocating bilingualism as a means of communication between English Canada and Quebec was manifested through a novel the subject of which concerned separatism by means of terrorism. Woodcock, not noting this irony, instead views Gravel as European rather than Canadian in his style and subject matter: "it is in no way incongruous to think of him merely as a French writer in the larger sense. There is nothing in the least provincial about his handling of the language" ("Five" 25). Woodcock is, however, careful to separate literary matters from political matters in this case: "Dubious though separatism may have been politically, it has been a great literary success" (25). Moreover, this fascinating sentence, tellingly written in the past tense, demonstrates how seriously Quebec sovereignty was taken by English Canada and — less than a year before the October Crisis — how separatism was viewed as a lost cause.

*Korsoniloff* is also represented as a European novel by Woodcock in his 1984 monograph on Cohen — "its analogues, and perhaps the works that had most influenced it, could be found more easily in European than in North American fiction" (4) — which he then again compares to Gide, as well as adding Kafka, Marguerite Duras, and Nathalie Sarraute. However, more than merely being a preoccupation of Woodcock, viewing the Spiderline novelists as European-influenced is a common observation by reviewers in 1969, including William French in *The Globe and Mail* and Barry Callaghan in *The Toronto Telegram*, who writes, "These five guys want to be real writers, and they are writing as they see and feel life around them. That doesn't mean, of course, that they haven't picked up some of the intellectual fashions of the day. They have, but at least they are international fashions" (Callaghan 5).

Indeed, although Woodcock comments, in *Matt Cohen and His Works*, on the emerging experimental writing occurring in this period of Canadian literature, and on its reliance on an international tradition of literature rather than an indigenous Canadian one (3-7), what becomes exceedingly clear in examining the reviews of the Spiderline Editions from 1969 to 1970 is how reliant Canadian *criticism* is on international models. A simple enumeration of the literary figures mentioned in the reviews gives one a clear picture of what literary reviewers were reading at the time, and against what standards Canadian novels were being held. For

example, in Duffy's review in *Saturday Night*, allusions are made to John Barth, J.D. Salinger, and Norman Mailer, while direct comparisons are made between the Spiderline novels and Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Donald Barthelme, Terry Southern, Mark Twain, Saul Bellow, Thomas Mann, and Feodor Dostoevsky. D.C.C. Chambers, in *Canadian Forum*, alludes to William Faulkner, and compares the novels to those of Kurt Vonnegut, Laurence Sterne, Joseph Heller, and Edward Albee. Philip Sykes in *Maclean's* compares *A Perte de Temps* to Camus and *Crime and Punishment*, while Woodcock — obviously the most Eurocentric of the contemporary reviewers — compares Gravel to Gide and Camus, but also alludes to the writing of Wilde, Stendhal, Balzac, Melville, Dickens, Hardy, Miller, Kipling, Lawrence, and Tolstoy. In all reviews, comparisons to other Canadian novelists are sparse: Woodcock mentions Margaret Atwood and Hugh MacLennan; *The Globe* review mentions Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, and Gratien Gelinus; and Duffy cites Hugh Hood and David Godfrey in passing. While some reviews, such as John Richmond's in *The Montreal Star* or V. Sharman's in *Canadian Literature*, make no comparisons at all, the consensus seems to be that Canadian reviewers were primarily reading international literature and — rather than being interested in fostering or tracing an indigenous Canadian tradition in literature — felt that Canadian novels were to be praised by being compared to American or European models, or chastised for failing to live up to those standards.

While international comparisons were a common point for several reviews, what *every* review shares is an attention to the experimental style of the five novels. It is perhaps this preoccupation with the experimentalism of the Spiderlines that prevents a consensus from emerging among the reviewers as to which of the novels are worthy of highest praise. That is, for some critics, the experimentalism of the novels was seen as an end in itself, and the novels were evaluated for their success or failure in living up to the expectations they had set (Sykes, Richmond, Callaghan) while, for others, experimentalism was an impediment to understanding and a youthful attitude that the writers would hopefully outgrow (Chambers, Sharman, Duffy). For Chambers and Duffy then, the least experimental was the most successful, that being *Fallout*, while Sharman finds even that novel too experimental, writing that its style “causes confusion and pretension [*visi*]” (92). Callaghan and French, for their part, argue that Marois is the strongest of the five, while only Woodcock finds value in *Korsoniloff*, noting that it exhibits “polish and proportion” (“Five” 25), an assessment that will, in retrospect, become “a polished miniature

masterpiece” (MC 22). Woodcock does, however, place Gravel’s novel above Cohen’s, a sentiment shared by Sykes — but not all of the reviewers could read *A Perte de Temps*. Of the reviews considered here, only Callaghan, Woodcock, Sykes, and Richmond actually read Gravel, and French doesn’t even try — passing the book on to a professor at the Université de Montréal, Philip Stratford.

The reluctance of several critics to attempt to read *A Perte de Temps* is perhaps reflective of the general success of the experiment. Although the novel did receive attention — *Time* magazine, in fact, only reviewing that text of all the Spiderlines — and went into a second printing, Anansi never attempted this experiment in bilingualism again. Rather, as Fetherling has noted, the publication of Gravel’s book led Anansi “to commission translations, most notably from Sheila Fischman, of a lot of Quebec writing” (155). Indeed, between 1970 and 1982, Anansi would publish many books by Roch Carrier, as well as collections from Jacques Ferron, Hubert Aquin, Jacques Poulin, Louis Caron, and criticism by Naim Kattan. The success of Anansi’s translations, particularly those of Carrier, may have also led other small presses in Canada to begin their own translation series, such as Coach House’s more experimental “Quebec Translations” — which would publish the work of Nicole Brossard, Claude Gauvreau, Victor Levy-Beaulieu, and Roger Magini — and Exile Editions’ translations of Jacques Ferron and Gilles Henault. However, in all these cases, the novels, even those produced by Anansi, did not succeed in avoiding the time lag (between Quebec publication and translation for English Canada) that the publication of *A Perte de Temps* was meant to alleviate. While Woodcock suggests, in 1971, that this experiment was not repeated as “Anansi has been unable to find another novel written in a French as limpid and as comprehensible even to the laziest bilingualist as that of Pierre Gravel” (“New” 41), another factor may have been the editorial board of Anansi at the time. As Lee explained in 1972, “Nobody in the office is completely at ease in French. Peggy Atwood and I are, as much as anybody is, but I have to get myself into a French-reading mood to read Quebec books very carefully” (qtd. in Stedingh 45). For whatever reason, however, as novel — and perhaps honourable — a gesture as it was, the release of simultaneous untranslated texts did not continue at Anansi, or any other publishing house, and *A Perte de Temps* remains a unique moment in the history of Canadian publishing.

While Anansi’s attempt to promote bilingualism might not have been a definitive success, the question also remains of how successful the Spiderlines were in their goal of “letting the best writers get into print,

find an audience and get on with their next book" (Lee qtd. in Richmond 7). While the suicide of Marois in 1971 prevents us from evaluating whether he would have lived up to the promise of *The Telephone Pole*, all of the other Spiderline authors went on to publish more, and perhaps "better," work. Sandman, initially the most prolific of the five, published a second novel, *Fords Eat Chevs* in 1973 with Oberon Press, followed by *The Brief Case of a Fat Man* (Dreadnought, 1974), culminating in a novel from Coach House in 1976, *Declining Gracefully*. After this publication, there is no record of Sandman producing any more writing in this country. Gravel, for his part, followed *A Perte de Temps* with a novella included in the New Press collection entitled *Creation* (1970), before accepting a position at the Université de Québec, and continuing to publish academic and literary titles throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Like Sandman, Such published his second novel, *Riverrun*, in 1973, but in contrast to Sandman received much critical attention — including the *Herald Magazine's* claim that "it's one of the best novels to come out of Canada — or anywhere — in some time and establishes Peter Such as one of the best creative writers we have" (back cover: *Fallout* 1977 ed.) — before he too devoted his energies to non-fiction, including studies of contemporary Canadian composers and of the natives of Newfoundland. Of the five, however, it is Cohen who gained the greatest national prominence, producing more than twenty-five novels, short-story collections, translations, poetry collections, and anthologies from the 1970s until his recent death, culminating in a Governor General's award in 1999 for *Elizabeth and After*.

Cohen is also the only one of the five Spiderline novelists who produced a second book for Anansi, *Columbus and the Fat Lady* (1972). Although one may view this general neglect of the other Spiderline novelists as Anansi having "done their duty" and leaving other publishing houses to take up these writers, it also seems to follow Fetherling's claim that Lee's enthusiasm was reserved for those writers "at the first stage of their careers (after which he often lost interest in them)" (106). One might also consider Polk's claim that "For many writers, Anansi got to be a sin of their youth, and they entered the mainstream" ("Spider's" 21); but, if one examines the second series of Spiderline novels, the energy and attention given to the project of printing first-time novelists is considerably diminished.

Released to little fanfare in 1970, Michael Charters's *Victor Victim* and Rachel Wyatt's *The String Box* do not resemble the original Spiderlines in appearance — Charters's book featuring a lithograph by

Charles Pachter on the front and back covers, and *The String Box* carrying a photo by Hilary Norman on the cover — and the price is no longer \$1.95, but \$2.50 and \$2.95 respectively. While the setting of both novels is Toronto, the narrator of *Victor Victim* spends much of his time in England, and one of the main preoccupations of the protagonist in *The String Box* is his nostalgia for his native England, a longing that finds some release in his discovery of an authentic “underground” British pub. Considering this subject matter, it is not surprising that both authors are British expatriates, Charters being born in England in 1940 and coming to Canada in 1965, while Wyatt came to Canada from the United Kingdom in 1957. Finally, although *Victor Victim* is written by a first-person unreliable narrator, both that novel and Wyatt’s satire lack the experimentalism and unconventional structure of the initial Spiderlines. Indeed, the indication that these books are part of the Spiderline Editions could go quite unnoticed, the “Spiderline Edition” line appearing in small italics on the back of *Victor Victim* and near the bottom left back cover of *The String Box* — in contrast to the front cover and centred position of that notice in the original series.

The lack of media attention to this second series is also a striking contrast to the response to the original. In a 1971 issue of *Tamarack Review*, for example, although both novels are reviewed together (along with a first collection from John Metcalf), the critic seems unaware or uninterested in the fact that they are part of the Spiderline Editions series, making no comment on the House of Anansi’s choice of publishing these books apart from noticing that they are both first novels: “since the three books I’ve been asked to review have in common only the fact that they are each first published works, I am denied my penchant for schemata and forced to consider each only on its own merits” (Woods 85). Similarly, while Woodcock promises to review the new Spiderline Editions in *Canadian Literature* (“New” 9), no further notice of Charters’s or Wyatt’s novels ever appears in that publication.

In “A Preliminary History: The House of Anansi Press,” Jennifer Andrews demonstrates how fruitful an examination of archival records can be to understanding the history of small-press publishing in Canada. In the case of the relative silence that greeted the second series of Spiderlines in comparison to the first, some light can be shed through the Woodcock-Lee correspondence housed at the Queen’s University Archives. While in the first issue of *Canadian Literature*, Woodcock asserts that the journal “seeks to establish no clan, little or large” (“Editorial” 4), in the case of House of Anansi, Woodcock does appear to play favour-



ites. Beyond the presence of many Anansi titles reviewed 1967-1972, Woodcock's editorial for issue 47, "New Directions in Publishing," is entirely devoted to Anansi's "courageous publishing and good editing" (9) as well as re-reviewing all of the Spiderline Editions — which he had already done for *The Toronto Star*. In the sequel to that editorial, in issue 48, rather than focussing on more established contemporary publishers, such as Coach House, Woodcock chooses to discuss Anansi's "break-away" publishing house, New Press.

Part of Woodcock's interest, however, can be explained by his growing friendship with Lee. While initial letters in 1970 are addressed to "Professor Woodcock," by 1972 both are on first-name basis and signing off with "Ever, George" or "Ciaou, Dennis [*sic*]." Although the correspondence does not begin until after Woodcock's first *Toronto Star* review of the Spiderlines — with which Lee had a "strenuous disagreement" (May 10, 1970) — Woodcock does feel enough of a connection to Lee to apologize for the lack of Spiderline reviews in *Canadian Literature*:

I am annoyed and rather ashamed that we have not yet a review in hand for the first four Spiderline books. It isn't exactly my fault. I sent them to a man I thought reliable, but, after repeated assurances, he still hasn't sent me the review.... The only thing I can think of doing is to re-review them quickly myself, taking a tangent from my *Toronto Star* review.... I am very put out by this, since the last thing I want to appear to be doing [is] to give Anansi books less attention than they deserve. (Woodcock to Lee: Aug. 6, 1970)

When Lee responds with "visceral" pleasure at Woodcock's "New Directions in Publishing" editorial (Mar. 24, 1971), a rapid correspondence ensues with Lee providing background information to future Anansi publications, and suggesting topics that Woodcock might cover in *Canadian Literature*. While Woodcock does not allow his opinions to be directed by Lee — he never, for example, agrees with Lee's assessment of Marois, nor does he run Lee's article on *The Telephone Pole* — the relationship between Anansi and *Canadian Literature* is certainly congenial.

On one hand, this correspondence demonstrates a strategy applied by the early Anansi editors, noted by Andrews, "to cultivate wider distribution ... through an intensive targeting of libraries, academic institutions ... and direct correspondence" (59) — something which Woodcock, as both a professor and editor-publisher, would fulfill. On the other hand, with the departure of Lee from Anansi in 1972 — the time when Wyatt or Charters might have been reviewed — we can see that



Woodcock becomes less interested in promoting Anansi titles as intensively as before, and the Lee-Woodcock correspondence now shifts to discussion of Lee's academic publishing, and of his new work *Savage Fields*. In fact, in the "Publish Canadian" issue *Canadian Literature* (#57), which claimed to assess the state of publishing in Canada, although Lee and Shirley Gibson respond to questions in a publishing forum, Woodcock's opening editorial only makes a single, brief mention of House of Anansi.

While the Lee-Woodcock correspondence may illuminate some reasons why the second edition of the Spiderlines received little attention from *Canadian Literature* or Woodcock, a reason for the more widespread disinterest in Anansi and the Spiderlines has been suggested by Polk: "Canadian literary nationalism, a novelty in 1967, was becoming old hat in 1972. Being a Canadian publisher alone wasn't news anymore" ("Spider's" 20). Indeed, with Lee's departure from Anansi, the Spiderline Editions seemed to become a thing of the past — along with other projects conceived to promote youth and national identity, such as the Younger Poets series and the Social Comment series.

It is surprising, then, that twenty-five years after the second series of Spiderline novels, Anansi (now an imprint of Stoddart, and under the editorship of Martha Sharpe) began to publish Spiderline Editions again. Like the books of Charters and Wyatt, the new Spiderlines are all physically distinct in appearance, and the Spiderline Editions logo has moved from the cover to the front title-page. Unlike the second series of Spiderlines, the novelists represented here seem more diverse — including a French-Canadian author in translation, France Daigle, and illustrator Nick Craine. Moreover, "contributors to the Spiderline series no longer have to be first-time authors and the range of genres in the series has been expanded to include creative non-fiction, short fiction, and even graphic novels" (Andrews 64). Similarly, while Natalee Caple's *Plight of Happy People in an Ordinary World*, with its nods to Luis Buñuel and the anti-realist novels of Milan Kundera and Italo Calvino, shares some similarities with the surreal world of Marois's *Telephone Pole*, there is no attempt to promote the authors as a group, to make their books look the same, or to advertise their shared youth, as in the first series. What appears to link them with the initial Spiderline series, then, is experimentalism: an attempt to "push 'the boundaries of what you expect' by challenging the limits of formal and thematic innovation" (Sharpe qtd. in Andrews 64).

Here, the removal of collectivity and the advocacy of stylistic diversity seems to reflect a change in publishing from the 1960s to the 1990s

noted by Frank Davey in the introductory essay to *Canadian Literary Power*. Davey argues that where, in the late 1960s, differences of gender, class, and politics were elided into a sense of “‘oneness,’” from the mid-1970s to the 1980s commonality was “replaced by equality as a condition of being ‘separate but equal’” (18). With changes to Canada’s population, the reformulation of government grants to the arts, and the growth of specialized presses that strove to represent specific regions or minority voices (such as TSAR, Theytus, or Turnstone), there appeared to be a “gradual political fading of once sharply-defined publishers like Coach House, Talonbooks, Press Porcepic, House of Anansi, and their transformation into almost indistinguishable general literary publishers” (38). Faced with this situation, Davey concludes that these presses must re-define themselves in order to survive:

A small publishing house, for example, that flourished twenty years ago under the ideologies of youthfulness, rebellion, and creative freedom, will have to self-consciously struggle either to re-establish those values in the 1990s as competitive, or to define a new and narrow set of values based on the interests of its current owners, editors, and authors. (39)

A few years after the appearance of Davey’s essay, we would see Coach House Press fold, only to re-establish itself as Coach House Books, which now emphasizes many of the qualities that distinguished it in the late 1960s — the publishing of concrete poetry, limited edition book objects, experimental fiction, and the exploration of new distribution technologies such as on-line books and CD-ROMs. In a similar fashion, the decision to reintroduce the Spiderline series in the late 1990s can be viewed as an attempt to regain Anansi’s earlier status as a “progressive” and unique publishing enterprise. However, the 1990s Spiderline titles only gesture, with nostalgia, to the “freewheeling” as opposed to the “political” sixties, and now seem to signify exclusively experimentalism (not “what you expect”) — but without unity of design, nor the conception of national unity and the attempt to speak for and to young Canadians. As of early 2000, with the publication of Darren Wershler-Henry’s ‘pataphysical list-poem, *The Tapeworm Foundry*, Spiderline authors are no longer restricted to prose.

Despite these differences from the first Spiderline series, however, several of the new Spiderline authors *are* first-time novelists, which, not coincidentally, coincides with the resurgence of interest in first novels in the mid-1990s, following the “international success” of such writers as

Anne-Marie MacDonald and Anne Michaels (Renzetti C6). Where being a first-time novelist was once a liability, and where the initial Spiderlines were an attempt to allow new voices to be heard, in the last few years it has become a distinct advantage to be a new novelist. Not only have *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Books in Canada* begun running regular columns reviewing “First Fiction” but there has been much media attention regarding new novelists, including two recent articles in *The Globe and Mail*. In “New Girls on the Block,” a 1998 article by Elizabeth Renzetti, it was reported that while earlier it “was extremely difficult to get a publisher to look at a first novel” the situation is such that now “agents can engineer bidding wars, and publishers sometimes don’t even have to bid on manuscripts, merely proposals” (C6), which has resulted in such success as Shauna Singh Baldwin’s “high-five-figure payment” for her first novel (Renzetti C6). A similar article by Alexandra Gill, entitled “Book Boys,” appeared a year later which also recounted the success of such first-time novelists as Evan Solomon and Andrew Pyper, who “received one of the largest royalty cheques for a first Canadian novel” (Gill C22). While how much value is placed on the literary merits of these first-time novelists, compared to the social interest these novelists generate — “a la Dino, Frank and Sammy in the fifties and Jay, Bret and Morgan in the eighties they run the cocktail circuit in packs” (Gill C22) — or their sex appeal (Renzetti C6), there is clearly an advantage, at least in generating publicity, to publishing a first novel today.

This ability to generate publicity is, perhaps, one of the few things that the early Spiderlines share with the new Canadian first-novelists. While MacSkimming and Andrews both consider the reemergence of the Spiderlines as part of a continuum, or “pick[ing] up lost threads” (Andrews 64) between the early Anansi and the new Stoddart/Anansi, it is clear that the original Spiderline books were products of their time and not a phenomenon that has continued over the thirty years of Anansi’s publishing history. With its diverse collection of authors, experimental styles, and youthful enthusiasm for “the new,” the local, and the bilingual, the original Spiderlines were really the vision of Lee and Godfrey at a time of great patriotism and of literary expansion.

That is not to say that the Spiderline series was not of paramount importance, or that it did not contribute to the current success of Canadian fiction. Not only did the 1969 Spiderlines launch the career of such writers as Matt Cohen, the appearance of the Spiderline series, and the attention it received from the national press, established Anansi in the public consciousness, allowing them to continue to publish important

fiction, poetry, and non-fiction for over thirty years. Andrews has also noted that what has made Anansi unique has been “its ongoing interest in finding and publishing experimental Canadian fiction as well as its support for the translation of French-Canadian texts into English” (55) — two qualities represented in the 1969 Spiderlines. In regard to the former, one should not underestimate the risk and value of publishing experimental fiction at that time, which Woodcock called “not merely courageous but also successful” (“New” 5), and that Anansi saw and responded to this type of writing early on, something which Lee would look back on in 1972 as a genuine shift in Canadian literary production: “I think the arrival of all these new novelists is the most exciting and important thing to happen in literary cultural history in Canada for the last forty years or more” (qtd. in Stedingh 49). The aforementioned early interest in Québécois writers by Anansi, observed in the Spiderline publication of Gravel, also ushered in a period of great translation activity, both at Anansi and at other Canadian publishing houses.

Finally, by demonstrating that first novels that were also experimental could be successful, the Spiderlines opened the field of Canadian publishing for new voices and styles. As Renzetti and Gill note in their 1990s articles, and Polk writes more explicitly in his memoir “A Spider’s Life: Anansi at Fifteen,” “The Lee and Godfrey of 1967 could not get published, but their counterparts are offered a wide range of presses from St. John’s to Vancouver . . . Such was not always the case. Anansi didn’t do it all, but it did its bit” (21). Although in 2000 it is perhaps naive to think that the “nationalist” agenda and optimism of the post-Centennial years could be maintained, it can be argued that Anansi’s 1969 Spiderlines did succeed in their “one modest aim: to change the climate of Canadian fiction.”

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

Thanks to Nicky Drumbolis (of Letters Bookshop, Toronto) for details on Rachel Wyatt’s *The String Box* and general small-press fact-checking.

#### WORKS CITED

- Andrews, Jennifer. “A Preliminary History: The House of Anansi Press.” *Textual Studies in Canada* 10/11 (1998): 55-68.
- Berton, Pierre. *1967: The Last Good Year*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1997.

- Callaghan, Barry. "House of Anansi: A Bold Venture." *Toronto Telegram* 4 Oct. 1969: 5.
- Chambers, D.D.C. Rev. of Spiderline Editions. *Canadian Forum* 50 (1970): 148-49.
- Charters, Michael. *Victor Victim*. Toronto: Anansi, 1970.
- Cohen, Matt. *Korsoniloff*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- Davey, Frank. *Canadian Literary Power*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1994.
- deVilliers, Marq. "The Underground Press." *Toronto Telegram* 7 Dec. 1968: 1.
- Duffy, Dennis. Rev. of Spiderline Editions. *Saturday Night* Nov. 1969: 58-61.
- Fetherling, Douglas. *Travels by Night: A Memoir of the Sixties*. Toronto: Lester, 1994.
- French, William. "Five of a Kind in a Fair Gamble." *The Globe and Mail* 27 Sept. 1969: 17.
- Gill, Alexandra. "Book Boys." *The Globe and Mail* 24 April, 1999: C22.
- Gravel, Pierre. *A Perte de Temps*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- Ludwig, Jack and Andy Wainwright, eds. "Introduction." *Soundings: New Canadian Poets*. Toronto: Anansi, 1970: no pag.
- MacSkimming, Roy. *Making Literary History: House of Anansi Press 1967-1997*. Toronto: Anansi, 1997.
- Marchand, Philip. "From Old Coach House Grew a Press." *Toronto Star* 21 July, 1996: A2.
- Marois, Russell. *The Telephone Pole*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- Moss, John. "Introduction." In *Fallout* by Peter Such. New Canada, 1977: n. pag.
- Nowlan, Alden. Rev. of *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola*, by Dave Godfrey. *Canadian Forum* Mar. 1968: 282.
- Polk, James. "Anansi, House of." In *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. 2nd Ed. Eds. Eugene Benson and William Toye. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1997: 33.
- . "A Spider's Life: Anansi at Fifteen." *Canadian Forum* June/July (1982): 19-21.
- Renzetti, Elizabeth. "New Girls on the Block." *The Globe and Mail* 10 Oct. 1998: C6.
- Rev. of *À Perte de Temps*. *Time* [Canadian Edition] 21 Nov. 1969: 18.
- Richmond, John. "Anansi's First Brood of Novelists." *Montreal Star* 27 Sept. 1969: 7.
- Sandman, John. *Eating Out*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- Sharman, V. "A Junked-Up Landscape." *Canadian Literature* 44 (1970): 92-93.
- "Small Presses: An Interview." *Canadian Forum* 47 Aug. 1967: 107-09.
- Stedingh, R.W. "An Interview with Dennis Lee." *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 7 (1972): 42-54.
- Such, Peter. *Fallout*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- . "Preface" to *Fallout*. Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1977: no pag.
- Sykes, Philip. Rev. of Spiderline Editions. *Maclean's* Oct. 1969: 111.
- Woodcock, George. "Editorial" *Canadian Literature* 1 (1959): 3-4.
- . "Five New Novelists Enter the Literary Lottery." *Toronto Star* 11 Oct. 1969: 25.
- . George Woodcock Papers. Coll 2095. Box 2/41. File 25 [Correspondence with Dennis Lee 1971-74]. Queen's University Archives, Kingston.
- . "New Directions in Publishing (1)." *Canadian Literature* 47 (1971): 3-9.
- . *Matt Cohen and His Works*. Toronto: ECW, 1985.
- Woods, Liz. Rev. of Charters, Wyatt, and Metcalf. *Tamarack Review* 56 (1971): 85-88.
- Wyatt, Rachel. *The String Box*. Toronto: Anansi, 1970.