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## Review: Mill Town: Reckoning With What Remains by Kerri Arsenault

David Vermette

Researcher and Writer, dgvermette@gmail.com

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**Review: Arsenault, Kerri. *Mill Town: Reckoning With What Remains*. New York: St. Martin's, 2020. 352 pages, paper, \$21.49. ISBN: 9781250155931**

Driving back to Massachusetts from visiting my grandparents in Maine, my dad would steer our family's 1972 Ford LTD through Westbrook, a small town just inland from Portland. One of several kids piled in the back of that station wagon, I can still conjure an olfactory memory of the town's paper mill, although I'm not sure I'd want to. It was an aroma you sensed with your eyes, as well as your nose. "People get used to it," I remember my mother commenting more than once, but my pre-teen brain couldn't put together that an insatiable demand for paper is the reason some people have to "get used" to their town smelling like several chicken farms' worth of rotten eggs.

Kerri Arsenault, author of *Mill Town*, a haunting work of nonfiction, hails from Mexico, which, along with neighboring Rumford, is another paper-manufacturing center in Maine. Her eclectic debut fuses memoir with creative nonfiction and journalism as she investigates the environmental impact of her hometown's paper industry. A couple of generations of Arsenault's family, including her father, labored in the local paper mill. Her father's death raised questions for Arsenault, and not only about the health hazards of mill work. It leads her deeper into an odyssey where she interrogates her identity, the fate of the working class, and its condition as the internally colonized.

Arsenault's impressively researched work raises far more questions than it answers: What is the effect on public health when buried toxins ascend the food chain? Is anyone tracking that? What is the cumulative effect of toxins, not only in the mill town, but in the paper products themselves distributed far and wide; or in food, like Maine's lobsters with their habitat right downstream from the factory-polluted Androscoggin that runs through Mexico?

She explores the depths of corporate deceit and the connections between environmental science, industry, and government that generate a confusing knot of contradictions when she digs for the truth. Does anyone within these sectors know how deep our environmental disaster goes? And what about the generations of people--the ones who must "get used" to the smell--that the paper industry is happy to keep laboring in a region known as "Cancer Valley"?

Arsenault leaves us with a baffling uncertainty, with a gnawing ambiguity about a great deal of these questions she poses. She searches through boxes of material; interviews numerous subjects both eager and otherwise; studies, reads, observes; and does her genealogy homework, traveling to ancestral homelands. In the end she finds that nothing written on paper is what it seems: from the record of her ancestor that named a town of origin in

Canada that did not exist, to the heartbreakingly inconclusive information on her father's death certificate.

Her story unfolds in a non-linear fashion, jumping from year to year, and topic to topic. And yet Arsenault's crack story-telling, and the engaging manner with which she enrolls readers in her tale, makes this *mélange* work. Wit, black humor, and a talent for taking verbal snapshots of the characters she encounters, win the reader over to her side. She earns the patience readers need to remain receptive to her grand narrative.

Arsenault's writing is rich in sensory images: visual, tactile, and occasionally auditory. Her descriptions are vivid, as if she continues to hold the memory in her imagination, right before her mental "eye," as she writes. Her prose is also rich in metaphors and similes, mostly reliable engines for her, often placed at the end of a paragraph as a punchline that propels the narrative forward. But sometimes these figures of speech spin out of control. In a discussion of the insufficiency of the mill's attempts to police itself Arsenault writes: "Like the TAKE TWO safety program [promoted by the local mill], the union honored the catastrophic hazard but never the indirect ones, the ones slipping in and out of our bodies like a vengeful riptide masked by the sparkle of the ocean's lure." The words are evocative and poetic but what they mean is opaque. (Why are the tides "vengeful"? And what exactly is the "sparkle of the ocean's lure" in this simile?) Risking a simile of my own, Arsenault is like a boxer. Not all of her rhetorical blows land but many of them do, with jarring, undeniable impact. And they keep coming.

Another intense feature of Arsenault's writing is its vast vocabulary. I had to look up *dehiscence* ("the splitting or bursting open of a pod or wound") and *antimacassar* ("a piece of cloth put over the back of a chair to protect it from grease and dirt or as an ornament"). I'm sure I have seen neither of those English words before, and they weren't the only ones.

Having Prince Edward Island Acadian roots, Arsenault weaves the tale of her ancestors into the book's fabric. This is not a book about Acadians or Franco-Americans. But Franco-Americans, especially those with roots in the New England mill towns, will recognize, as if in a mirror, what Arsenault recounts and describes. From the family dynamics, to the relationships to work and to the Catholic Church, this book testifies to the contemporary state of Acadian and Franco-American culture, now some generations removed from its origins north of the US border.

*Mill Town* is a considerable achievement, a work that speaks in a clear and clever voice to fundamental questions about the future of industrial and post-industrial society. For anyone interested in the intersection of environmentalism and social class, *Mill Town* is an essential read. Franco-Americans, especially those with Acadian roots, will perceive that Arsenault has

done us all a service, enriching our story by placing it in a national context. For all other readers, *Mill Town* is an honest, forthright, contemporary rumination on perennial questions of mortality, temporality, and the dynamics of belonging.

-David Vermette