



Angie Abdou had been writing operational manuals for light-armoured vehicles, tourism blurbs, academic articles, and online help—everything except what she wanted to do—until an accident triggered an avalanche of fiction.

ANGIE'S CRASH COURSE

*Chaucer goes skiing in Angie Abdou's
The Canterbury Trail*

KEVAN WILKE / 68 PHOTOGRAPHY

ONCE UPON A TIME, IT WAS common for people to take turns telling stories, in the same way as contestants take turns singing on *American Idol*.

That's how **Geoffrey Chaucer's** *The Canterbury Tales*—modeled on *The Decameron* by **Giovanni Boccaccio**—became one of the first staples of English literature.

The Canterbury Tales is a sometimes bawdy conglomeration of 14th century tales told by 29 disparate pilgrims on their way to Canterbury.

Set in the avalanche-ridden mountains of eastern British Columbia, **Angie Abdou's** *The Canterbury Trail* gradually introduces 14 characters on a Chaucerian quest: to take refuge in a back-country skiing hut called Camelot.

All the action occurs near Coalton, a fictional community that could easily be mistaken for Fernie, where Abdou lives.

All characters will follow a wilderness route forged by a disaffected hermit named Heinz who detests the powder puffs.

Although the reclusive Heinz abhors the noise and the messes that visitors and their dogs leave behind, he has nonetheless erected a van-sized sign mapping the area from the trailhead right over the summit and on to Camelot.

He has also erected signposts and named the route The Canterbury Trail. Youthful ski-bums prefer to mawkishly call it The C— Trail.

Ever since she discovered her first favourite book—*One Fish, Two Fish* by Dr. Seuss—**Angie Abdou** knew she wanted to write, but it took a near-fatal accident to get her started on fiction. The turning point was a head-on collision on the highway between Calgary and Crowsnest Pass, about a month before her thirtieth birthday, at about 100 kilometres per hour.

“After surviving that,” she says, “suddenly the logic of stalling on anything tends to disappear. The prospect of failure or embarrassment doesn't seem nearly as dire as the prospect of not ever having tried at all.”

The driver immediately quit his job as an engineer at Nortel and moved into a little backwoods hut with no running water or electricity. And Abdou, who was a passenger in her own car, began writing her first fiction collection, *Anything Boys Can Do* (ThistleDown 2006).

Abdou's sports-related first novel *The Bone Cage* (NeWest 2007) was recently shortlisted for the CBC Canada Reads Award. Now she has published her second novel, **The Canterbury Trail** (Brindle & Glass \$19.95), reviewed here by **Cherie Thiessen**.

This is how some people talk—and live, love and laugh—particularly within the brash ski culture of risk takers who partake of marijuana and booze. Some locals in the Fernie area have taken offense at such crudity appearing in print.



IN *THE CANTERBURY TRAIL*, WE FIRST MEET Three Musketeers in toques; a trio of intense skiers nicknamed Loco, F Bomb, and SOR. SOR stands for Stud on Rockets. Loco refers to someone who is a local. And F Bomb is a First Nations man. And they swear a lot.

They take along a big city journalist, Alison, who is documenting her descent



Cherie THIESSEN

from gentrified Toronto into countrified Coalton, getting her squeezes in wherever she can. Her female competition is Shanny, a hot young hitchhiking snowboarder.

Add to the mix, heavy drinking snowmobilers Kevin and his friend, Frederik, who both drive trucks for the local mill, and Kevin's second wife, Claudette.

Back-country skiers include Michael, a real estate developer, his very pregnant wife, Janet, and Michael's friend, Lanny. Add two of Janet's lesbian friends, the earth mother, Cosmos, and her lover, Ella, who use snowshoes.

It's a small town—Ella was Kevin's first wife before he left her for Claudette,

prompting Ella to try the other sex—and it's late April. Everyone will be squeezed into Camelot. They will share their hovel with four dogs, one of which doesn't appear to be house trained.

Nearly everyone will drink and/or get stoned on magic mushroom tea, hash brownies, and other concoctions. They'll fight, they'll puke, they'll pout, they'll storm and they'll slumber, encountering anger, frustration, disappointment, jealousy, passion, elation and boredom.



ABDOU CLEARLY KNOWS OF WHAT SHE writes. Along with her whimsical character sketches, she includes local tidbits such as a recipe for Mary Jane's Cookies, a hangover cure and instructions on how to mix a Shotgun.

Echoes of Chaucer tend to recede as the narrative pace picks up along the *Canterbury Trail*. Only a few characters seem to match those in *The Canterbury Tales*. Lanny is a miller and there's a miller who tells a tale in Chaucer. The ribald Wife of Bath correlates only slightly to Abdou's lusty Alison. The story-telling of the characters tends to fizzle due to fatigue, drugs and alcohol. Only Lanny completes his story of an encounter with an angry, mother moose.

This amounts to a gnarly, original fictional journey. Abdou's second novel is not the first literary work to emulate Chaucer's classic, but it could be the most uninhibited and most fun.

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Cherie Thiessen is an avid skier who reviews fiction from Pender Island.

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ANGIE ABDOU INTERVIEW

BCBW: I wonder if Chaucer encountered any similar feedback in his day?

ABDOU: We don’t know. But one thing that might surprise people today is the pure wildness of *The Canterbury Tales*. Because it is a classic text, people sometimes assume it must be stuffy and serious and boring. Though Chaucer’s text does have serious content, taken as a whole it is one of the bawdiest and most ribald texts of the English language. Remem-

ber, it’s a tale about sinners using a pilgrimage as an opportunity to indulge in their favourite sins.

BCBW: That works as a good explanation for the drugs and swearing in your book.

ABDOU: Well, let’s just say I take my tone from Chaucer. Just because a novel includes drug abuse does not mean that it endorses drug abuse. My husband asked me at one point if I was really going to include those marijuana cookie

recipes. “You have a lot of young readers—is that the message you want to send out?”

My answer was that we live in a society where access to information is not the issue—instead we need to teach young adults what to do with information and how to think about it critically. If young people want recipes for drugs, they can find far worse with a simple click on Google. Drugs are a part of mountain culture, and they are a part of this book.

BCBW: Does it matter if some readers haven’t read *The Canterbury Tales*?

ABDOU: Not at all.

BCBW: Why did you choose a B.C. publisher?

ABDOU: Around the time I was deciding what to do with this novel, I read a piece in *B.C. BookWorld* about writers abandoning B.C. just as they were becoming successful. There is, the article said, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy about B.C. writers being doomed to remain mid-listers... This piece struck a chord with me. It made me feel loyal to the Western Canadian writers, editors and publishers who had been so helpful in the various phases of producing my first two books. So I decided to try a B.C. publisher. After all, *The Canterbury Trail* is a very B.C. novel.

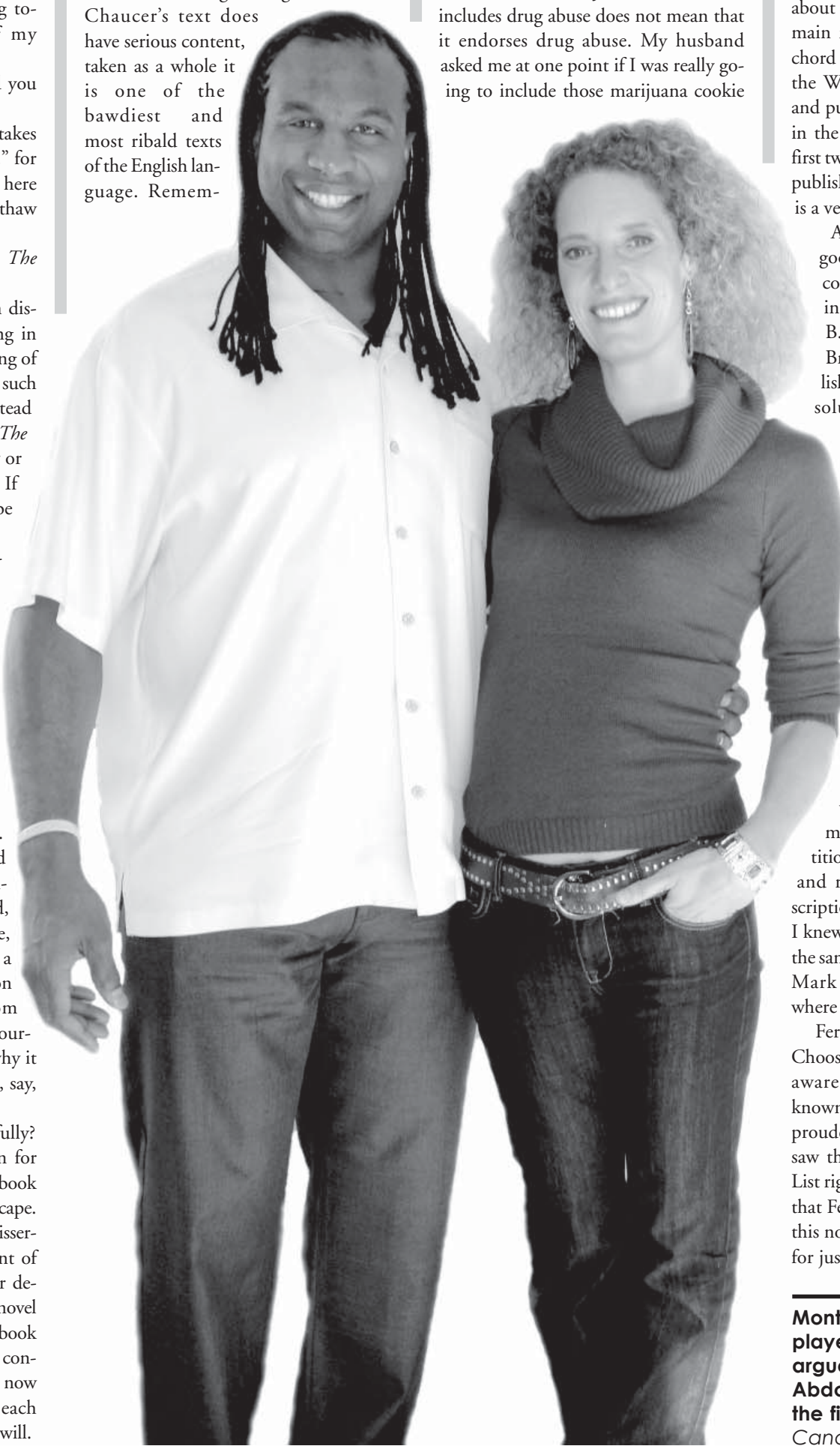
Also, Fernie is very isolated. It’s a good twelve-hour drive from Vancouver. I thought going with a press in Victoria would link me into the B.C. publishing world. I also chose Brindle & Glass because of the publisher, **Ruth Linka**. I trust her absolutely. We were undergraduates together at the University of Regina. I remember sitting next to her, in about 1989, for a Feminist Theory course taught by **Joan Givner**. I wonder what we would’ve thought then if someone could’ve told us that one day she’d own a press and would publish my third book?

BCBW: Now you’re on the cover of *Quill & Quire*, Canada’s national publishing trade magazine, having *not* opted for Toronto.

ABDOU: At times it feels pretty weird. One of the weirdest moments of the Canada Reads competition was picking up the *National Post* and reading **Mark Medley**’s description of me as “virtually unknown.” I knew what he meant, of course, but at the same time I thought, “Oh yeah! Well, Mark Medley is virtually unknown where I come from!”

Fernie is a long way from Toronto. Choosing a B.C. press was, in part, an awareness that it’s important to be known first at home. I have to say, my proudest moment so far came when I saw the book featured in March’s Hot List right here in the *Fernie Fix*. To know that Fernie’s young hip crowd is reading this novel and enjoying it made me feel, for just a moment, pretty darn cool.

Montreal Canadiens hockey player Georges Laraque argued on behalf of Angie Abdou’s first novel as one of the five finalists for CBC’s Canada Reads competition.



BC BOOKWORLD: Why the fascination with Chaucer?

ANGIE ABDOU: Chaucer is possibly the very first English writer to have a true interest in character. Before his work, characters tended to be flat representations of certain sins (Sloth or Pride, say) or certain virtues. Chaucer uses characters to represent particular classes in his medieval society, but he quickly shows that these people cannot be contained within their designated roles.

BCBW: So you’re doing the same, but with contemporary people.

ABDOU: Exactly. I have ski bums, rednecks, hippies, developers. I hope the reader discovers these characters cannot easily be contained within their labels. Chaucer used a pilgrimage to bring together diverse elements of medieval society. In that way, Chaucer had an opportunity to satirize a cross-section of his medieval society. So I asked myself—what type of journey would bring together diverse components of my community?

BCBW: What other parallels did you use?

ABDOU: *The Canterbury Trail* takes place in April. That’s an “of course!” for anyone who knows Chaucer. But here it is spring snow rather than spring thaw that brings everyone together.

BCBW: So would you describe *The Canterbury Trail* as a social satire?

ABDOU: Satire implies a certain distance from the material—a looking in at and a poking fun of, a highlighting of the shortcomings of *others*. I have no such distance from this material. So instead of satire, I have been referring to *The Canterbury Trail* as a black comedy or a tragicomedy or a comic-tragedy. If anyone has a better label, I would be happy to hear it.

BCBW: What do you say to readers who might be offended by some of the language in your novel? Especially the C-word.

ABDOU: I am completely surprised by how offended some readers are. I guess **Germaine Greer** was right when she claimed “it is one of the few remaining words in the English language with a genuine power to shock.” It’s in the original Chaucer. He refers to *queynte* for a misplaced kiss that’s meant to land on an intended lover’s lips but lands instead, well, somewhere else. It is, therefore, one of the oldest words to describe a part of the human body—a part on every woman, and the place from which we all come. So if you find yourself recoiling at it, you might ask why it should be any more offensive than, say, the word “kneecap.”

BCBW: Were you using it mindfully?

ABDOU: Of course. One reason for the C-word’s predominance in this book relates to the feminization of landscape. At an earlier stage, this novel was a dissertation project, and the best moment of that process was when an examiner declared: “Nature is a character in this novel ... and she is ANG-RY!” But once a book is published, a writer no longer has control over it. *The Canterbury Trail* is now out there in the wide world for each reader to make of it what he or she will.