



## Light Lifting

*Alexander MacLeod*

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"Engrossing, thrilling and ultimately satisfying: each story has the weight of a novel." —*The Economist*

*This was the day after Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield's ear. You remember that. It was a moment in history – not like Kennedy or the planes flying into the World Trade Center – not up at that level. This was something much lower, more like Ben Johnson, back when his eyes were that thick, yellow color and he tested positive in Seoul after breaking the world-record in the hundred. You might not know exactly where you were standing or exactly what you were doing when you first heard about Tyson or about Ben, but when the news came down, I bet it stuck with you. When Tyson bit off Holyfield's ear, that cut right through the everyday clutter. —from *Miracle Mile**

Two runners race a cargo train through the darkness of a rat-infested tunnel beneath the Detroit River. A drugstore bicycle courier crosses a forbidden threshold in an attempt to save a life and a young swimmer conquers her fear of water only to discover she's caught in far more dangerous currents. An auto-worker who loses his family in a car accident is forced to reconsider his relationship with the internal combustion engine.

Alexander MacLeod is a writer of "ferocious intelligence" and "ferocious physicality" (CTV). *Light Lifting*, his celebrated first collection, offers us a suite of darkly urban and unflinching elegies that explore the depths of the psyche and channel the subconscious hopes and terrors that motivate us all. These are elemental stories of work and its bonds, of tragedy and tragedy barely averted, but also of beauty, love and fragile understanding.

## Light Lifting Details

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Author : Alexander MacLeod

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## From Reader Review Light Lifting for online ebook

### Barbara says

This is a collection of 7 short stories that rival the best of the form. MacLeod centers them around people and situations that almost all of us think we know but he gives us the details that take us deeper. At times, I laughed out loud and, at others, I raced through the pages because I was so worried about the central character that I had to see what happened. Highly recommended.

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### Alexis says

I did not love this book the way everyone else did. I think it was actually overhyped for me. I've read 15 short stories collections this year, and I think that had an influence on my enjoyment.

That said, there is a lot that is right with this collection. I like the sheer physicality and some of the stories were great. However, I disliked his over use of sentence fragments and listing. I could appreciate some of the technical aspects of the stories in this collection, but I didn't like it as much as some of the other story collections I've read.

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### Alexander Inglis says

Shortlisted for both the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize and 2011 Commonwealth Prize, Alexander MacLeod's collection of short stories, *Light Lifting*, comes by its praises honestly. It is the author's debut collection (although the stories had already appeared in various literary magazines). One newspaper reviewer called MacLeod "an unexpectedly physical writer" and "an explorer of gritty masculinity and adrenalin-fuelled anger ... he can also be surpassingly delicate".

The seven stories include:

"Miracle Mile" in which two young men compete with and encourage each other in cross-country track tour;

"Wonder About Parents" featuring a sick child at Christmas visiting grandparents;

The title tale, "Light Lifting", about a young man joining a work crew one summer to lay bricks;

"Adult Beginner I" in which college kids dare each other and dive from a hotel rooftop into the river;

"The Loop", about a twelve year old who delivers prescriptions and other goods from a local pharmacy, meeting an odd collection of regular customers in their homes;

"Good Kids", a family of four boys and the integration of a new neighbour into their closed clique;

"The Number Three", following an autoworker dealing with a tragic accident that changes his life.

It has to be said there was heavy weather encountered completing this collection. It's not just that the stories are often downbeat; they often end mid-note, crying out for some sort of resolution. Nor is the language gratifying; it is more plodding, scattered even and frequently obtuse for no particularly clear reason. In reflecting on the collection, I asked myself which story sat with me, that I internalised, and perhaps it was "The Loop" that came closest. But for most of them, I barely connected with these lives portrayed that were so grim, so unnecessary, so frankly little engaging. Once back on the shelf, I doubt if this one is coming down again.

## Paula Dembeck says

This is MacLeod's debut volume of short stories which was long listed for the Giller Prize in 2010.

A collection of seven rather long, but beautifully written stories, they all have a tinge of sadness, violence or despair. The short story format is not easy to write or to appreciate. I have struggled with them for years, for the most part feeling dissatisfied with the resolution chosen by the author. Although I did experience this with one of the stories ("Light Lifting"), most had a satisfying conclusion.

These stories are all about ordinary people living ordinary lives, but MacLeod's rich detail makes you care about the characters, immediately bringing you into the story and making you part of their world. We meet Mike and his running buddy Burner in the "Miracle Mile"; young parents with a sick child in "Wonder About Parents"; Robbie a student in a summer job in "Light Lifting"; Stace courageously facing challenges despite her terror in "Adult Beginner 1"; a schoolboy on a bike making pharmacy deliveries in "The Loop"; a family of boys learning about friendship and life's twists and turns in "Good Kids"; and a man whose quick decision leads to tragedy and self blame in "The Solitary Three".

Macleod has done some meticulous research to present these tales, as many of the details he includes in these stories (the experience of a runner before and after a race, the intricacies in the life cycle of lice, or the placement of bricks to fit a design in a patio) is not within the experience of most writers. Well done.

A very enjoyable read and a fine debut.

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## Paul Riches says

Light Lifting, Causing Some Disquiet

A vow was made some time ago that my reviews would reflect things I loved, or even liked a lot. Something that caused mixed feelings were not factored in. Hence, my hesitation over Light Lifting by Alexander MacLeod.

This collection of short stories was recommended to me by my friends @kveenly and @rebeccahh95, who have excellent tastes in literature. But I can't help feel something is missing from my understanding of this volume. It was nominated for the Giller Award in 2010, which is impressive, but for me it seemed average.

Alexander has a nice writing style, poetic in some places, with several sentences that just sing off the page. At times passages are very spellbinding, making you cheer or feel sorry for a character. He seems at his best in these spots, bringing his full power out in order to score an emotional point. The bottom of the swimming pool scene in Adult Beginner I illustrates his talents here precisely.

Wonder About Parents is my favourite of these seven stories. The journey is compelling and the use of

flashbacks fill in so much of the feelings. It also features very short, snappy sentences, made to form like memory fragments. This feature is enchanting and inventive.

The downfall for my enjoyment was the length, endings and/or topics of each piece. It seemed like most entries were too long, with padding to make them epic in some way. And most just seemed to end with a shrug from the writer to the reader. The title story, Light Lifting, especially suffered from this idea. What happened at the end? Did I miss something? That same thought can be applied to the plots of some of these stories as well. Sick people are depressing? Autistic kids are different? I think that is what some of these are about, but don't quote me.

I have no regrets about reading this volume, even through it was my #fridayreads for over a month. Alexander has skill and talent with words, and it should be interesting when his next volume comes out. I just hope he becomes leaner with the wordage and, as Walt Disney would say, have a story and stick to it. After all it worked for Walt.

Scoopriches

P.S. Light Lifting is copyright 2010 and is written by Alexander MacLeod. Published in 2010 by Biblioasis.

To Read More Reviews, Check out my blog:  
<https://scoopmentalpropaganda.wordpress...>

Thank You.

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### **Ruth Seeley says**

I've heard Macleod's prose described as muscular and it is that. Perhaps I'm not being fair to him, but I was disappointed by this collection. Too many of the stories had indeterminate, abrupt endings that didn't seem to be thematically justified. I'm surprised this collection won the Giller. [But it didn't, as the commenter on this review points out - it was shortlisted but didn't win. Maybe that's what I meant - was surprised it was shortlisted? I'm not really. Thinking maybe I should read this collection again and a little more slowly next time.] Perhaps it's an age thing - most of the stories focused on children, adolescents, or very young adults - in whom I find it hard to take much interest. Talk to me when you've actually lived through something - like your 30th birthday.

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### **Jer Fairall says**

The first two stories are among the best pieces of short fiction I've ever read, and the five that follow are only marginally less amazing. Would it be ridiculous to call MacLeod Canada's finest current short story writer on the basis of just one published collection? Because I'm going to anyway.

Miracle Mile (\*\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)

Wonder About Parents (\*\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)

Light Lifting (\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)  
Adult Beginner 1 (\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)  
The Loop (\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)  
Good Kids (\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)  
The Number Three (\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\*)

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### **Paige says**

Wow, these stories are awfully well-written. Each one grabbed me and refused to let go. My only complaint is one about short stories in general -- it bothers me to get attached to characters and to storylines only to have to let them go so quickly. I will absolutely be rooting for Alexander MacLeod to write a novel. In the meantime, I'd recommend this collection. But be warned, the author definitely seems to be drawn to themes of human frailty and the bleak aspects of life. Not recommended for those looking for a cheery little story to lift the mood.

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### **NancyHelen says**

Fabulous, pithy, well observed and beautifully written short stories. I continually hold this book up as an example of what short stories should be like.

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### **Ms. K says**

Whereas it is possible that Alexander MacLeod once laid bricks for a living, it is unlikely that he also was a track star, almost drowned as a child, or worked the GM assembly line in Windsor. However, so perfectly, deeply, does he take us to the belly of these experiences that lifting your head from the print is a disorienting experience. He was shortlisted for the 2010 Giller for *Light Lifting* against an incredibly tough field. He says it took him 13 years to write these seven stories, and I don't doubt it. This is craftsmanship.

Johanna Sibsrud won the Giller that year for *The Sentimentalists*, so I had better add that to my "To Read" shelf!

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### **Alan says**

4 stars is perhaps too many - 3.5ish.. review later

I enjoyed many of the stories here, particularly the sport ones (great one about running starts the book) - the preparation, dedication, how it feels to run, to swim. And a couple of good growing up ones, accurate on the spite and indifference of adolescence. A very sad one about the aftermath of a car accident closes the book. But occasionally I felt the style inappropriate (contrived) or I couldn't get to grips with some of the characters. So, 4 stars is a bit much, but three would be not enough..

(normally I would quote to illustrate but had to take the book back to the library before I could jot down any)..

## Moshe Mikanovsky says

Didn't finish. Didn't care for any of the stories that I finished (first 3) - until I got to somehow get into the story and feel anything (other than annoyance) to the characters, they just ended, mid scene (almost mid sentence!). So abrupt I wasn't sure why... the other stories I started and didn't care enough at all to continue with any of them. So not for me.

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## Sharon says

An excerpt from my review of Light Lifting in The Nervous Breakdown:

MacLeod draws on a wealth of specialized information about such wide-ranging topics as parasites, running, and auto factories. But it is his understanding of our extremes of endurance, the physical as a metaphor for the spiritual, which make Light Lifting a profoundly wise book.

For the rest of the review, see: <http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/sh...>

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## A.J. says

Alexander MacLeod's debut collection of short fiction, drawn from 15 years of writing for literary magazines in Canada, tempts you to indulge in the kind of superlatives that might be counterproductive in the age of hype; just how brilliant can it really be? Well, pretty damn brilliant, actually. Among the seven longish stories that make up this collection, there is not a single misstep. This book is that good.

These stories lead in one direction, dart down a side alley, and then return to themselves, without any bad welds or weak seams to give away their construction. "Number Three" erects the Chrysler minivan as a mythic object, while exploring the consequences of a devastating accident; "Adult Beginner I" finds teenaged lifeguards diving into the Detroit River from the roof of the Holiday Inn, as a swimmer goes out of her depth; and "Wonder About Parents" encapsulates, in staccato prose, the strange intimacies of parenthood. "Good Boys," an apparently simple story about four brothers and the kid across the street, manages to be both funny and moving while avoiding any form of predictability.

Read it.

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## Krista says

According to CTV, Light Lifting is a work of "ferocious physicality" and I think that pretty much sums it up. From the beautiful athletic forms of mid-distance runners (**Miracle Mile**) and lifeguards (**Adult Beginner I**) to the grotesque -- the baby diarrhea that soaks through a diaper from foot to neck in **Wonder About Parents** and the grapefruit sized hernia on the belly of the mostly naked Barney in **The Loop** -- people are described in unsparing terms, without judgement, their outsides often mirroring exactly who they are on the inside (no matter how JC tries to change himself in the title story, **Light Lifting**, there is no escaping what he appears to be). There are fights -- brawls -- and road hockey and bicycling and running and hard labour and

swimming and physiotherapy and love-making; sickness and peak performance; ordinary life and the breath-taking cheating of death. However, Alexander MacLeod is also described as a writer of "ferocious intelligence", and this collection displays that as well: within every physical form simmers hope and regret and love and fear, all presented in a spare and masculine style.

The writing in *Light Lifting*, while at times masterful, can be a little uneven. In **Adult Beginner I**, for instance, Stace flashes back to a family trip to Nova Scotia where her mother insisted on teaching her to swim in the Atlantic. This passage seemed overwritten to me and took me out of the story:

*The wall of water came into her vision, looming over her mother's shoulder like an old-style gangster thug sifting out of the crowd in a grey trench coat with a brim of his fedora pulled low down. He was so thick and so wide, he blocked out the sky. He shoved her mother forward headfirst into the sand before grabbing the girl and carrying her off in the opposite direction.*

But then this bit redeemed the scene for me:

*Timing blurred. It was impossible to keep track of the minutes and seconds. The first flash of panic gave way to a cloudy, sleepy feeling. Nothing came in or went out -- no air and no water. She felt completely full, as if all the gaps and extra spaces in her body had been made solid. She went limp and for a moment she felt like a floating thing, like a person who might really be able to move easily, and for a long time, in tune with the up and down beat of the ocean. This, she thought, this was it. Swimming. Almost right.*

*But then a series of sharp stinging pains came through her skull and she felt first the individual hairs, then whole clumps of her scalp being yanked out of her head. In a dizzy haze she thought she saw her father, but his glasses were gone and his sweatshirt seemed bloated and pulled strangely across his shoulders. His nose was scrunched up like something smelled very bad and he seemed angry, furious with somebody. She thought she heard her name.*

*"Stay with me Stacey," he said.*

*"Stay here. I've got you. It's going to be okay. We have you now. Stay with me."*

That had my heart in my throat, and even though it's a flashback, so you *know* Stace had survived the near-drowning, it was the most danger-filled scene in the story for me, likely because it seemed urgent and immediate. I didn't feel the same urgency when Stace tripped on the edge of the hotel roof or when she was looking for Brad's body or even when the ship was bearing down on her. And by the way, that ending felt manipulative to me: like a line from Alanis Morissette's "Isn't It Ironic".

*Mr. Play It Safe was afraid to fly  
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids good-bye  
He waited his whole damn life to take that flight  
And as the plane crashed down he thought  
"Well, isn't this nice."  
And isn't it ironic, don't you think*

I think by now the consensus is that Ms. Morissette wrote about a list of coincidental, and not very coincidental, events that most wouldn't call *ironic* really, so the cheats of fate that come back to haunt the characters in this book don't feel entirely *truthful*; can be nearly as mockable as the song. You learn to swim? Well, then here comes a ship that "advances over the water and swallows everything in its path". You run the race of your life? Well, then you can be a hero for about a half an hour. You think it's a good thing that union organizers have preserved your job at the auto plant in the face of ever increasing automation? Well, then here's a car accident that kills your wife and child, one that would have been survivable had there not been a

manufacturing flaw in the air bags.

Aside from the unavoidable fate bombs, there were many declarations that I can't decide if I like. Are they profound or a little trite? Suitable for book clubs or pillow embroidery?

*We have to scrounge for meaning wherever we can find it and there's no way to separate our faith from our desperation.*

*We are made most specifically by the things we cannot bear to do.*

*There are things we must allow each other that have nothing to do with kindness.*

And if I can be so bold as to make one more complaint about what is actually a book I enjoyed quite a bit, I was lost during the long passage in **Wonder About Parents** where the dad and his brothers discuss the Pistons and their nicknames. I can usually follow along when a book is talking about a subject I'm not knowledgeable about, but this basketball talk was beyond me and I found it annoying. Okay, one more complaint: I didn't really like the telegrammic style of this story; I needed more verbs! Having said all that, though, this was my favourite story in the book. It perfectly captures the mystery at the center of traditional nuclear families: the parents were once strangers and then a couple with a full life together, and then the kids got added in later. MacLeod says it best:

*We get to choose each other, but kids have no say about the nature of their lives... What are we to these people? Genetics. A story they make up about themselves.*

One thing that I really appreciated about *Light Lifting* was the apparent research that went into its writing. So many topics, from lice to bricklaying to the auto industry, seem written by an insider, and in a way that was relatable and interesting. The way MacLeod told the story of racing the trains through a two and a half mile tunnel under the Detroit River between the USA and Canada made me wonder if this is something he actually did as a high school kid. And that was another thing that really worked for me in this book -- I am familiar with its settings and think I'm about the same age as the author. He was born in Nova Scotia, like my own father, and I will be going there next week to visit my parents. Although I've only driven through Windsor on the way to Detroit -- and only went to Detroit for cheap flights out of its airport -- I do live in Southern Ontario, the approximate setting of most of these stories. Many details that MacLeod mentions in this book conjure specific memories for me and I started making a list: Ben Johnson, the Fisher Price circus train with the giraffe sticking its head out the roof, Wildberry Coolers, Playdough's Fuzzy Pumper Barber Shop, Riviere-du-Loup, Alexander Keith's, Marineland, film strips, the Muskokas, and Lik-M-Aid Fun Dip. I am always impressed by a Canadian author who isn't afraid to mix in details that are only relatable to other Canadians.

Overall, I thought the writing in *Light Lifting* was very good. Short stories are a tough format and MacLeod succeeded in making me care about new characters every thirty pages or so; as physical as each story read, the author never forgot to infuse the people with hearts and minds and souls.