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General

A Sack of Teeth
Grant Buday
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Vancouver, British Columbia-in the cutting italics that six-year-old Jack Klein's mysterious uncle Avram uses to pronounce judgment on their homogenous homeland-is "the end of the world." The globe, both literally and symbolically, figures heavily in this tender novel of displaced souls.

In one fraught day in September, 1965, a grave six-cornered star will cast its sharp shadow over everyone: Ray, Jack's father, a can-do engineer living for his technology, his Thunderbird, and his mistress; Jack's wistful mother, Lorraine, who turns, like a solitary houseplant, to her one sun, a chivalrous Frenchman named Antoine renting her basement (which would be the bottom of the end of the world); and Antoine himself, who, having ceremoniously given Jack a world globe, leaves Lorraine a suitcase of foreign currency, a cache of eponymous gold fillings, and an old picture of himself guarding Treblinka. Also, there are his thirty-six canaries and one ampoule of cyanide.

Delicately loose and taut at the same time, the narrative interweaves these several stories around the hours of Jack's first day of the first grade. Jack, much like his flailing parents and their small-minded neighbors, is buffeted by the tsunami waves of a world in revolution: the Beatles, Sinatra's Rat Pack, Vietnam, Betty Friedan. From Jack's prison-yard escape at recess to the smeared lipstick smile of a woman being jilted by her married lover, the author carefully collects details of smell and touch.

Buday has written several novels, including Monday Night Man and White Lung, as well as an account of his travels in India. His last three novels won Canadian fiction awards. In this latest work, his writing demonstrates a wonderful ear for daily sadness and its dark twin, melancholy. "It felt as if she'd awakened on a train hours out of the station-the wrong train," he writes. "Lorraine saw for the first time what she'd done in marrying Ray-taken the wrong train." Effortless moments like this redeem A Sack of Teeth from its rather schematic use of metaphor

to signal the characters’ fates.