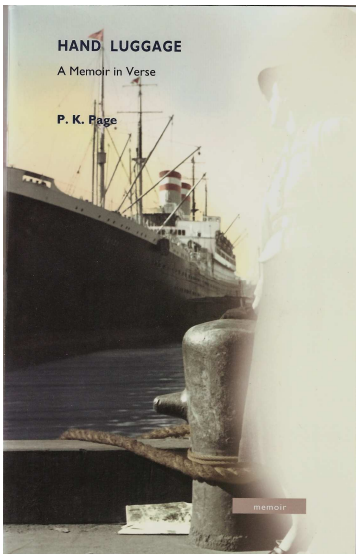


PAGE, P. K. *Hand luggage: a memoir in verse*.
Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2006.

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P. K. Page has emerged as one of the dominant figures in Brazil/Canada studies. In a way, she has achieved her prominence by default, since there are not many writers from one country who have seriously explored the other in their work. Nevertheless, her renown in the field is fully deserved, as her 1987 travelogue

Brazilian journal is not only an impressive account of the two and a half years she spent in Brazil in the 1950s but also of her travails with the Portuguese language. As the considerable literature on *Brazilian journal* often stresses, the Page who emerges in that text is a regal individual. She is very much an *embaixatriz*, someone who looks at the world from a (safe) distance and has social dealings almost exclusively with the ruling classes. Thus, as one reads her new memoir, it comes as quite a surprise to discover that Page perceives herself, not as an aristocrat, but as peripheral and anti-establishment. *Hand luggage: a memoir in verse* is an autobiographical long poem. It traces the life of Patricia Kathleen Page from her early days in Calgary, through her youth in the Maritimes, her discovery of her writing voice in post-Second World War Montreal and Ottawa, and then her travels

around the world as the wife of the Canadian diplomat, and former magazine editor, Arthur Irwin. Page's sense of marginality seems to be directly influenced by her childhood in Alberta, which she describes at the beginning of her poem as the "land that Ontario/ looked down its nose at" but which "we thought [...] civilized. Civilized? Semi" (p. 9). She even suggests that it is this "chasm" between the way Albertans saw themselves in the first decades of the twentieth century and the way their Eastern co-citizens saw them that explains her lifelong sense of being an outsider: "Such my preparation for a life of paradox / A borderland being, barely belonging, one on the outskirts, over the perimeter" (p. 9).

Later, when she moves to Montreal after having lived in New Brunswick, she labels herself "a kid from the sticks" (p. 17). In fact, to the very end of the poem, she continues to present herself as an oppositional figure. Although at times she has some difficulty reconciling her life of "privilege" with her political self-image as being "left-wing ever since I could vote" (p. 84), she never ceases to portray herself as a supporter of the underdog. In terms of Page's personality, if not character, another significant aspect that emerges in *Hand luggage* is her military roots.

Page comes from a military family and a main imposition on military personnel and their kin, as she notes, is that they not engage in politics – except of the warring kind. In her words, "Apolitical us, as the army *must* be,/ and pro-war, as of course I was" (p. 19-20). Needless to say, there are major parallels between the military life into which Page was born and the diplomatic life she entered when she married Irwin. For one, like that of the military, the apolitical role of diplomats is only partial. As Page describes the diplomats in her circle, they were "groupies". They were "a cheering squad which/ didn't cheer, but like lackeys attended events/ dressed to kill" (p. 39). Moreover, while she contends that of the two or three lives that she "lived/ I loved, without doubt, the official life least" (p. 75), one suspects that the reticence demanded by diplomatic culture was never really alien to her. Written in 2004 (p. 91), the year Page turned 88, *Hand luggage* comes late in the author's life and allows her to take a retrospective look at that life. With a few glaring exceptions, notably concerning her husband and children, this is what she does. For example, while examining her glorious years in Montreal, when the new arrival was embraced as "a real writer" by such prominent

poets as A. M. Klein, F. R. Scott, A. J. M. Smith, and Patrick Anderson, Page makes the telling observation: “What baffles me now is how English we were./ In a francophone city, I never spoke French” (p. 17, 18). This retrospective quality also informs Page’s account of her years in Brazil. As in *Brazilian journal*, she underscores how utterly unprepared she and her husband were for their move to Rio de Janeiro, given their lack of knowledge of both the country’s language and culture. Likewise, she also emphasizes the Edenic dimension of her sojourn, “a consummate bliss wheresoever my eye/chanced to fall” (p. 54). However, she immediately qualifies her assessment, affirming that it is impossible for her to forget what she terms the “congenital blindness [that] afflicted the rich,” which was the only way they could “have lived with the poor in their faces” and not notice them. Interestingly, she adds that she now sees in “Canadian cities the same/ Disregard for the down-and-out. We have caught up!” (p. 55). Not surprisingly, race remains a major challenge for Page, and presumably for Brazilians. She writes that “there was nobody black” in Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs at the time and that the “Brazilians we met –/ all were white, every one.” She

further claims that, “in staffing one’s house/ the rules of employment were plain: upstairs maids/ *must* be white; and *copeiros*.” Everyone else, “the cook and the laundress and cleaners could be/ black, white or whatever” (p. 61). Tellingly, she does not specify if “the rules of employment” were established by the country or by the Canadian hostess, which of course would influence one’s view of her self-description as being “colour-blind” (p. 61).

Hand luggage concludes on a somewhat apocalyptic note, with Page stating that she is writing “as the world falls apart” and pondering if the environmental degradation that dominates the daily news is not a sign that we are reaching the “world’s end” (p. 91). She also confides that what “interests” her most is not this world but the one “beyond me: the hologram, fractals and ‘god’” (p. 92). Page’s comment coincides with her theory of art. In her recent essay, “A writer’s life,” she maintains that “art has two functions: a lower and a higher. The lower is invaluable. It shows us ourselves – Picasso’s *Guernica*, for example. The higher – more valuable still, in my view – gives us glimpses of another order,” a place “without maps” (1999, p. 21-22). She unnecessarily complicates this high art/low art divide when she

interprets *Guernica* as an example of representational art. Still, the fact she considers aesthetic explorations of the world beyond as more significant than those of the here and now may explain the curious shape of her work, including autobiographical texts like *Brazilian journal* and *Hand luggage*. If the real is what lies beyond the visible, no matter how radical their politics, literary representations of everyday life cannot help but be of secondary value. Consequently, whether Page is perceived as an oppositional writer or as an establishment one becomes almost beside the point.

Works Cited

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