

Cluck is a comic novel—picaresque-like but not wholly consistent with all the criteria of this genre—that focuses on the maturation—from age 10 to age 50—of its protagonist, Henry Parkins, the only child of a single mother, Alice Parkins who is a manic depressive.

The novel is a series of portraits of Henry at various stages of his development starting with his childhood, through his adolescence, early adulthood and, finally, mature adulthood:

- He is a **controlled, anxious child**—thanks to the over watchfulness of his mother. His favourite toy with which he engages into his tenth year is a farm—including chickens— that he sets up and packs away carefully.
- In his high school years, partially to escape the chaos of his home life and the torture of his school days, Henry becomes a **radio junkie** addicted to the world of music and the Top 10. He **drops out** of high school before graduating but manages to secure, thanks to the efforts of his next door neighbour ‘Dave’ a job with Agriculture Canada based on his love for animals.
- After his mother dies in a single vehicle accident (Chapter Six) he carries on living in his mother’s house alone except for the tenants in the downstairs suite, a gay couple Jim and Chas. One night, while driving he manages to receive on his car radio a show from Idaho hosted by a female DJ who he decides is more or less speaking directly to him, so much so that he decides to drive to the station to meet her. This drive sets off a series of catastrophic events that set the stage for his eventual liberation from the controlling and stifling life he has lived up until then. He leaves his **government job** for **employment with a private chicken farm**. This leads to further self-discovery, his talent for **artistic expression in both craft and photography**. Ultimately this also connects him to a group of people who nurture and support him to continue his self-discovery/self-expression including his sexual maturation.
- Finally, in his fifties he has approached some modicum of self-understanding, self-control, and mutually rewarding connection with the outside world.

Despite the rocky foundation of a childhood in the “shadow cast by his mother” (Amazon blurb), Henry perseveres with defining his own path through life, with finding his own unique sense of fulfillment and meaningfulness without straying from the interests that have been at his core from the beginning: his love of animals—particularly domestic birds, his creative playfulness, and, despite his own self-centredness and heightened defensiveness, his co-existent sensitivity to the needs and wants of those individuals with whom by dint of circumstance or fate his life becomes intertwined.

Cluck is kooky (strange or eccentric) and quirky (idiosyncratic, unconventional) and was, I found, a generally uncomfortable, squirm-inducing read:

- Henry just barely engaged my sympathies and I couldn’t get a handle on his ricocheting between bumbling silliness and clear-eyed purposeful resolve. The traditional *picaro* is a sympathetic rascal, a **“sympathetic outsider, untouched by the false rules of society.”**
- I found the chicken farming/chicken feathers/whole gamut of poultry metaphor and symbolism overpowering and not particularly elucidating. It’s a huge metaphor with many possibilities and I just couldn’t find out how to limit them or where to go with them.
- There is way too much on the subject of masturbatory behaviour for my liking.

I do, however, like:

- the picture this novel presents of an ultimately benign world that allows for ‘letting go of broken things’ and for ‘possibility in everything’.
- And I persevered with this book because it did manage to give me enough faith in its story-telling purpose that all the craziness would somehow sort itself out. I was pleasantly surprised by Henry’s active role in unscrambling this omelette, much of his own making.
- I enjoyed the development of Henry’s artistic side foreshadowed in his childhood play.

Partly because of the importance of ‘place’ in this novel, I wonder if the book is an exploration of—dare I say it—Canadian-ness and our odd, difficult-to-define, immature-mature identity, well described by Conrad Black in his 10 June 2017 article in the National Post, “Resist Trump Bashing” on our government’s latest

pronouncements of Canadian foreign policy. Black wrote: “Apart from the compulsive references to that chimera [referring to ‘Climate change and the Paris accord’], the most unsatisfactory element of the Freeland speech was the even more worm-eaten chestnut that Canada is a “middle power,” echoing what John Diefenbaker enunciated to the United Nations in 1960. It was so then but is not today. Of the 198 countries in the world (counting Taiwan, the Vatican, and Palestine), Canada is for its GDP, resources, talent of work force, stability of institutions and quality of life, and by any other measurement except population and military capability, one of the 10 or 12 most important in the world. Canadians don’t generally realize that or think like that, but we must grow into the place we have earned and if the foreign minister won’t tell them that, who will?”

Form

Writing style: naturalism

Voice

THIRD PERSON LIMITED OMNISCIENCE: *The author enters the mind of just a few characters, usually one per chapter or scene:* He stood stiff as a fence post, watching her come his way. What did she want? he wondered, as she approached. Then he saw the determination in her face. Good crackers! She was going to kiss him, no matter what. She did, too, and he nearly fell over.

ADVANTAGES OF THIS POV:

- *It has all the advantages of third person unlimited POV.*
- *You can concentrate the story by keeping to major characters’ (and strategic minor characters’) thoughts.*

“A third-person limited narrator may remain in the voice of the point-of-view characters though this may sometimes be somewhat less overt than first-person narration. Finally, the omniscient narrator will use the authorial voice some or all of the time.”

DISADVANTAGES OF THIS POV:

- *There aren’t any, really; by imposing POV discipline, you minimize the downsides of unlimited omniscience.*

Punctuation – No quotation marks...a function of the narrative voice?

Timeline

Chapters

Childhood

1. **One** 1970 Uncool

Adolescence – High School

2. **Two** High School Radio Junkie – Grades 11 & 12

Young Working Adult

3. **Three** Snake Eyes
4. **Four** Longer Nails
5. **Five** New Occupants
6. **Six** Turkeys and Chickens

Adult on his own —after the death of his mother

7. **Seven** Kluk Transmission
8. **Eight** Radio Noise

9. **Nine** Show of Feathers
10. **Ten** Cry Fowl
11. **Eleven** Bear Growls
12. **Twelve** Tisket a Tasket
13. **Thirteen** Mink Patrol
14. **Fourteen** Constellation Room
15. **Fifteen** Brooding Machine
16. **Sixteen** Dirty Annie's
17. **Seventeen** On Fire

In his fifties

18. Henry Eventually (Why is the final chapter unnumbered?)

Characters – [at least 45] and Settings

Family

Henry Parkins
Alice Parkins, Henry's mother
Aunt Esther, his mother's sister in England

Kits' High School

High school teacher Mr. Bromley
Donny, the skinny Chinese kid and Nathaniel
Debi (Sister Golden Hair)
Mr. Sogland, high school counsellor
Black-eyeliner girl at school

Neighbourhood

Fire chief
Mr. Gheakins – Neighbour 3 doors down
Giselle Martin from Social Services
Mr. Dieter Lawson and Mrs. Lawson – next door neighbours
Their son Tom Lawson, Henry's childhood playmate/friend/neighbour
Dave and Patsy, the new next door neighbours
Chas (hair stylist) and Jim (longshoreman) – Alice's tenants
Chas (hair stylist) and Aristedes (Greek deli owner) – Henry's 'tenants'
Mrs. Krumpskey
Chinese Herbalist

Agriculture Canada

Henry = Fax God
Chief
Kitty, the girl who works at the Arbutus Mall
Janine, the receptionist at work
Sue, the boss of the HR department
Elaine – Her boyfriend Bob whose father is the owner of Swift Farms, a competitor to Lightstone Farm

Idaho/Radio Station - KLUK

Jamie Lee Savitch
Billy Wray
Charity
Mary Lou

Shoshone County Jail

Deputy Sheriff
Judge

Lightstone Poultry

(Widow) Wendy
Her son Joey
Norman (café)
Lucy, Joey’s wife and their son Dennis Jr.

The trouble at Jericho Beach

Professor Jon Bakon, UBC Law professor
Female judge who tells Henry to “grow up, get a real job and stop sneaking around in the bushes taking photos of kids. You’re behaving like a dumb cluck, ignoring your responsibilities.”
The mother and her three nude children who Henry photographs

Content

Symbolic/metaphoric framework

Chickens
Eggs
Feathers
Breeding
Feeding
Cleaning
Predation
Organic farming
Omelets

‘My Little Ducky’
Patsy: Ask him why the hooligans egg the house
(Judge to Henry) “You’re behaving like a dumb cluck”

Themes

Human Psychology

Mothering and nurturing
Self-control vs. self-abandonment
Normality vs mental illness (manic depression)
Eccentricity vs Out-of-control behaviour
Saving Face/Making up
Presentation/Facade vs. Underlying reality
Unexpressed/Repressed sexuality
Uncertain sexual orientation/Bisexuality and homosexuality
Bullying and victimhood
Marginalization
Grief and haunting
The process of maturation/growing up
The harsh, unresponsive, unfeeling world vs the caring nurturing world
Friendship and learning to have and be a friend

Man and animals

Animal husbandry
Animals nurturing man

Creative Expression

Pop/rock music as a cultural definer and unifier
 The medium of radio as a connector
 Art making as therapy and self-discovery

Law and Politics

Chaos vs. controlled order
 Law making and law breaking
 Government regulation

The ‘power of place’

Vancouver and nearby US cities and towns
 Travelling to connect

Synonyms for control *noun* command, mastery

authority	restriction	dominion	subjection
curb	rule	guidance	subordination
Discipline	Supervision	Juice	Superintendence
Domination	Ascendancy	Limitation	Supremacy
Force	Bridle	Manipulation	Sway
Government	Charge	Might	Weight
Jurisdiction	Check	Predomination	Driver’s seat
Management	Clout	Qualification	Inside track
Oversight	Containment	Regimentation	Upper-hand
Regulation	Determination	Ropes	Wire pulling
Restraint	Direction	Strings	

Antonyms for control

Chaos	Neglect	Powerlessness
disorganization	Advantage	Relinquishment
Freedom	Inability	Renouncement
Lawlessness	Weakness	Mismanagement
helplessness		

Quotable Quotes

“Room in there for everyone.” = last sentence of the novel

p296 – The giant chicken house is on fire, she says. Let it burn, Henry thinks. There is indeed possibility in everything.

Wikipedia: The picaresque novel (Spanish: "picaresca," from "pícaro," for "rogue" or "rascal") is a genre of prose fiction that depicts the adventures of a roguish hero/heroine of low social class who lives by his or her wits in a corrupt society. Picaresque novels typically adopt a realistic style, with elements of comedy and satire. This style of novel originated in 16th-century Spain and flourished throughout Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. It continues to influence modern literature. According to the traditional view of

Thrall and Hibbard (first published in 1936), seven qualities distinguish the picaresque novel or narrative form, all or some of which an author may employ for effect:

- A picaresque narrative is usually written in first person as an autobiographical account.
- The main character is often of low character or social class. He or she gets by with wit and rarely deigns to hold a job.
- no plot. The story is told in a series of loosely connected adventures or episodes.
- There is little if any character development in the main character. Once a picaro, always a picaro. His or her circumstances may change but they rarely result in a change of heart.
- The picaro's story is told with a plainness of language or realism.
- Satire is sometimes a prominent element.
- The behavior of a picaresque hero or heroine stops just short of criminality. Carefree or immoral rascality positions the picaresque hero as a sympathetic outsider, untouched by the false rules of society.

“...the modern picaresque begins with *Lazarillo de Tormes*, which was published anonymously in 1554 in Burgos, Medina del Campo, and Alcalá de Henares in Spain, and also in Antwerp, which at the time was under Spanish rule as a major city in the Spanish Netherlands. It is variously considered either the first picaresque novel or at least the antecedent of the genre. The protagonist, Lázaro, lives by his wits in an effort to survive and succeed in an impoverished country full of hypocrisy. As a picaro character, he is an alienated outsider, whose ability to expose and ridicule individuals compromised with society gives him a revolutionary stance. Lázaro states that the motivation for his writing is to communicate his experiences of overcoming deception, hypocrisy, and falsehood (*desengaño*).”

What's a Picaresque? The Top 5 Novels

By William Girdali |
Jul 20, 2012

[Busy Monsters](#) (newly released in paperback) is about a jilted fiance who embarks on a hilarious, ill-advised odyssey to win back his beloved. It's also a picaresque. What's a picaresque? Author William Girdali explains, while also giving you his five favorites.

“Picaresque” is an eely tag. The Spanish word *picaresca* came from *picaro*, first used in the early 1600s and which in English can mean rogue, bohemian, adventurer, rascalion. We took *picaron*, the augmentative of *picaro*, and made the accusatory-sounding “picaroon,” a lovely synonym for “picaro” that Merriam-Webster will tell you also means “pirate,” although *Picaroons of the Caribbean* doesn’t have the ring it should. The picaresque novel—the term wasn’t coined in English until the early nineteenth century—has shape-shifted since its first known incarnation in Spain, the anonymously authored *Lazarillo de Tormes*, published in 1553. But most picaresque novels incorporate several defining characteristics: satire, comedy, sarcasm, acerbic social criticism; first-person narration with an autobiographical ease of telling; an outsider protagonist-seeker on an episodic and often pointless quest for renewal or justice.

Those traits set a broad trap certain to snag many a novel that never thought of itself as a picaresque; minus the satire, they very well could describe Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The road novel, like the quest epic, is a

genre unto itself, but it just so happens that the terms of the picaresque require travel, which might have something to do with the title of what is sometimes cited as the first picaresque in English, *The Unfortunate Traveller* by Thomas Nashe, published in 1594, a miserable and barely readable book. Tweak the traditional traits of the picaresque just a pinch and think of all the titles that might apply. My own novel, *Busy Monsters*, has two direct ancestors I can name, both of which contain elements of the picaresque among the manifold traits that constitute their genius: *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*. I filched from them openly, as I filched from these five immortal picaresque novels:

1. *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow - A contender for the novel of our national consciousness, *Augie March* begins with the resounding and ecstatic line, “I am an American, Chicago born,” and doesn’t let up for five-hundred pages. In his letters Bellow disparages the term “picaresque” and those who utter it in earnest, but in *Augie March* you can feel him channeling Henry Fielding and the picaresque tradition. When Martin Amis dubs Bellow the greatest American novelist—greater than Melville, Twain, or James—he refers to the middle-period Bellow of *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog* and *Humboldt’s Gift*, but it’s *Augie March* that captures the American character in all its untamed exuberance.

2. *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding - On the title page of *Joseph Andrews* you can find Fielding’s debt: “Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of *Don Quixote*.” His first published novel after a decade as a playwright, *Joseph Andrews* falls just shy of the unmitigated greatness of *Tom Jones*, and yet it is the Fielding novel I found myself thinking of almost daily during the composition of *Busy Monsters*. Fielding called *Joseph Andrews* a “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” and although he was being intentionally grandiose, the label fits. Part of what makes the novel so delicious is its scathing parody of Samuel Richardson’s outrageously popular novel *Pamela*, whose pharisaical moralizing disgusted Fielding. Its straight-faced subtitle is “Virtue Rewarded,” and Fielding knew this was a prudish ruse.

3. *The Adventures of Roderick Random* by Tobias Smollett - Unjustly forgotten by most readers, Smollett is a master storyteller, the equal of Dickens and Wilkie Collins in his facility for dazzling you with narrative. Strongly influenced by *Don Quixote*—Smollett translated Cervantes’ novel into English—*Roderick Random* has a knockabout and often melodramatic plot, from London to Africa to South America, but Smollett has so much fun with it you forgive him his globetrotting eccentricities. The novel delights in a linguistic vibrancy and brash comedic sensibility that made it, in its day, the only serious competition for Fielding’s *Tom Jones*.

4. *Under the Net* by Iris Murdoch - The “net” in the title of Murdoch’s debut novel is of course not that insistent net that daily entangles us, but the rather more glorious net of intellection and language. As it traces the cerebral and artistic flowering of writer Jake Donaghue, *Under the Net* unfolds along preposterous plotlines, one of which involves the kidnapping of a canine television star. Because *Busy Monsters* is also self-consciously about literature and language, I wondered how much I was robbing from *Under the Net*, and upon rereading the novel I was pleased to be reminded that I’d never do that breed of storytelling as flawlessly and riotously as Ms. Murdoch. It’s always a tremendous treat when a first-rate thinker and stylist collides with comedy.

5. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain - When Ernest Hemingway famously quipped that all American literature comes out of *Huckleberry Finn*, he wasn’t merely indulging hyperbole. For many the Great American Novel, *Huckleberry Finn* towers as testament that beauty can rise from the rubble of national calamity. When Huck refuses to turn in Jim and instead consigns himself to hell, it is a refulgent turning point in American consciousness and perhaps the grandest moment of humanism in all of American letters. I’ve always been awed by the fact that the masterwork to emerge from the holocaust of American slavery was not the somber *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but the rollicking and comedic *Huckleberry Finn*. Don’t ever let your schoolteachers or librarians or anyone else take it from you.

