



READING GUIDE

The Man Game

Lee Henderson

INTRODUCTION

This first rule of *The Man Game* is talk about *The Man Game*. The second rule of *The Man Game* is talk about *The Man Game*. Go on, tell all your friends about *The Man Game*. Tell your mother and father and grandparents and cousins, the man on the street and the girl next door. Tell them all that *The Man Game* is perhaps the greatest book about naked lumberjack wrestling they'll ever read.

Winner of the 2009 BC Book Prize, *The Man Game* is Lee Henderson's debut novel and the follow-up to his Danuta Gleed Literary Award–winning short story collection *The Broken Record Technique*.

The Man Game is a rich, sprawling look at life among the rowdy lumberjacks of Vancouver circa 1886, where a man is measured not only by how much he can drink and how big he can grow his moustache but by how fast he can fell a tree and how hard he can punch another man in the face. The town is a bubbling cesspool of muggers, bitter personal rivalries, labour uprisings, rampant venereal disease, shadowy opium dens, and racial intolerance, not to mention The Whore Without A Face and a casual murder or two—and sooner or later, it's all going to boil over.

Along comes the enchanting Molly Erwagen. Accompanying her husband, Sammy, a bookkeeper who's been tragically paralyzed in an oddly romantic accident, Molly is a headstrong free spirit who sees opportunity in every obstacle and who possesses a persuasive charm no one can resist. Captivated by the reckless way in which the men of the town go about beating the tar out of each other in the street, Molly hatches an intricate and devious plan.

Enlisting the aid of Toronto, an outcast Native, and two exiled loggers named Litz and Pisk, Molly takes the common bare-knuckled brawl and adds a layer of poetic sophistication along with full-frontal nudity. The resulting “man game” is a real crowd-pleaser, and soon the clandestine competitions between hirsute mountain men take on a life of their own. But not everyone approves of this new underground sport, and pressure from the police force, labour leaders, and shady politicians leads to a violent confrontation that might prove to be even bigger than the man game itself.

Featuring a cast of unique and unforgettable characters and sporting helpful annotated illustrations of essential man-game moves and holds, this old-timey tale of what it means to be a man is both tender and two-fisted.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEE HENDERSON

Q: What kind of research went into creating your rough-and-tumble take on the Vancouver of 1886?

Yeah, I did years and years of research. I read a lot of first-hand accounts of what life was like for people circa 1886 in Vancouver, and I read the old newspapers and some history books. I studied old maps and read old novels from that time, and I extrapolated from that.

Q: Were there any literary or cinematic inspirations for *The Man Game*?

Old vaudeville was the main inspiration, and from vaudeville came all the best early gags and characters in early silent film. Charlie Chaplin's films, Harold Lloyd, the Marx Brothers, and Buster Keaton all play an essential role in how I thought about this book. Cormac McCarthy was a great literary inspiration; without him I don't know if I'd have seen a way to experiment with the historical voice. I found the liberty to create a different, modern version of the Wild West template thanks to McCarthy's pioneering. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the film by Robert Altman, was a great reference for me, too. It was filmed in B.C., for one, and it's about this world. There's a scene in the movie about a guy contemplating growing a beard that I found especially inspiring. *Elephant Man* by David Lynch was on my mind a lot while I wrote. I watched a couple episodes of *Deadwood* and was really happy to see that show on TV; I think there are some real affinities to that show's premise, and it came out during the dark middle years of writing *The Man Game* and helped inspire me not to feel too insane working on this idea. Another literary inspiration was Ben Marcus. His first book, *The Age of Wire and String*, was an important early influence—I read it years before I started this, but I kept thinking about the language he employed. Beckett and Coetzee are influences as well, but my book has much more vaudeville than either of them, even Beckett.

Q: Where do you feel the novel fits within the context of Canadian literature?

I wasn't thinking about this question while I wrote the book, so it's difficult to answer, as I feel a bit like I'm using the wide end of a wedge to fit my novel into a narrow space in CanLit. I did see Canadian literary precedents to my weirdness, though. I was reading books like Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billie the Kid*, Robert Kroetsch's *Studhorse Man*, George Bowering's experimental cowboy novels, Jack Hodgins's magic realism, Daphne Marlatt's poetic approach to history, Sky Lee's mapping of the immigrant story, Michael Turner's interest in sexuality, cityscape, and structure in his poems and novel ...

Q: The novel cuts back and forth between a modern and a historical setting, touching on similar themes. What similarities do you see between twenty-first century and pioneer Vancouver?

There's more glass and fibre optics, but other than things like that I don't think much has changed in Vancouver. The personality of the city hasn't changed, and the same issues surrounding immigration and labour, combined with racial prejudice, exist today as they did back then. I'd say, for the most part, that's my point.

Q: What inspired your decision to include illustrations of the man-game moves?

I love to draw, and usually my big ideas come from drawings I've done. I did my first drawings of the man game in creative writing classes. I drew them instead of writing comments on other students' stories.

Q: Your previous book, *The Broken Record Technique*, is a collection of short stories while *The Man Game* weighs in at five hundred pages. How did your writing craft change for a project of such length? Did you set out with the intention of writing an epic or did the story itself dictate it?

Yeah, I wanted to write something epic. I wanted to do something that would remind me of music by Kevin Drumm or Sunn O))) or Satanstornade, something really dark, funny, loud, and strange.

Q: A little internet research regarding Calabi & Yau reveals some rather interesting references to superstring theory and extra-dimensional mathematics. How did the obscure concept of the Calabi-Yau manifold find its way into *The Man Game* as an addictive pastry treat?

Impossibility is a theme.

Q: Facial hair is mandatory for the men of *The Man Game*. Did you do any in-depth research into the moustache or beard styling of the time? Do you think the success of the novel will contribute to a renaissance in facial hair for the young men of today?

Beards are a signature style in B.C.'s history of facial hair. There's a ton of beardo weirdos in Vancouver. Cute Vancouver girls accidentally get crushes on homeless men thinking they're members of Black Mountain. When it comes to beards, Vancouver is the place to be. I can't grow one, though, because I get creepy dry skin from it.

Q: Which Canadian authors, living or dead, do you think would fare the best in the man game?

LOL. All matches must take place in Vancouver: Robert Kroetsch vs. Farley Mowat. Patrick Lane vs. George Bowering. Derek McCormack vs. Michael Turner. George Woodcock vs. Pierre Berton. Al Neil vs.

Steve McCaffery. Michael Winter vs. Michael Crummey. Steven Heighton vs. Kevin Chong. Rawi Hage vs. Bill Gaston. Guest choreography by Sheila Heti, Annabel Lyon, Emily Carr, and Ethel Wilson.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “Men spoke of her smile on their own terms inside the solitude of their hearts” (p. 62). Discuss the enchanting effect that Molly Erwagen has on men, and her role as a muse in *The Man Game*.
2. As a reader, what are your feelings toward Molly? Do you feel seduced by her persuasive personality, or are you unsure of her motives?
3. Much like Molly, Minna is an object of desire in the present-day plotline. How are the two attractive female characters similar, and how do they differ?
4. Sammy Erwagen is a much different man from those normally found in the saloons and work camps of frontier Vancouver. Discuss his paralysis and his masculinity, especially in comparison with the lumberjacks.
5. What role does Toronto play in the novel, as both a facilitator for Molly’s plans and as an outcast from his own people? What do you think his illness symbolizes?
6. The Whore Without A Face—described by Peggy as a “wildflower” (p. 156) and a “manslaughterer” (p. 281)—leads Dunbar to a rather painful and distasteful end. Discuss the symbolism of her alluring mystery in comparison with Molly’s seductive personality.
7. How does Kat and Minna’s present-day story reflect Sammy and Molly’s historical plotline, and what insights does one bring to the other?
8. The historical plotline is written in the third person while the present-day plotline is written in the first. How does the narrative person relate to the events of the plotline itself?
9. *The Man Game* presents a Vancouver struggling with a violent clash of white, Native, and Chinese cultures. Discuss the role racism plays in the novel and in the history of the city.
10. There are many social and cultural clashes throughout the novel. How does the man game, a form of intense physical conflict between two men, serve as a unifying factor in this divided community?
11. Frontier fiction often explores a journey into the unknown, the endurance of hardship, and the testing of moral resolve. Discuss the plot and themes of *The Man Game* in the context of frontier fiction.
12. The novel presents a number of different interpretations of masculinity, including burly lumberjacks, paralyzed accountants, and opium-addicted businessmen. What does it mean to be a man in the world of *The Man Game*, and consequently, what does it mean to be a woman?