



The Incident Report

Martha Baillie

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In a Toronto library, home to the mad and the marginalized, notes appear, written by someone who believes he is Rigoletto, the hunchbacked jester from Verdi's opera. Convinced that the young librarian, Miriam, is his daughter, he promises to protect her from grief. Little does he know how much loss she has already experienced; or does he?

The Incident Report, both mystery and love story, daringly explores the fragility of our individual identities. Strikingly original in its structure, comprised of 140 highly distilled, lyric "reports," the novel depicts the tensions between private and public storytelling, the subtle dynamics of a socially exposed workplace.

The Incident Report is a novel of "gestures," one that invites the reader to be astonished by the circumstances its characters confront. Reports on bizarre public behaviour intertwine with reports on the private life of the novel's narrator. Shifting constantly between harmony and dissonance, elegant in its restraint and excitingly contemporary, *The Incident Report* takes the pulse of our fragmented urban existence with detachment and wit, while a quiet tragedy unfolds.

The Incident Report Details

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Author : Martha Baillie

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From Reader Review The Incident Report for online ebook

Corinne Wilson says

What an odd little book. At first I was confused by the poetic language and personal tone of the security incident reports, until I figured out that the librarian is using them as a sort of private diary, recording past memories, snippets of her time with her lover, and daily interactions with colorful patrons and keeping these "incidents" in her desk. One of the library's regular members is convinced that he is the opera character Rigoletto and that the librarian is his long lost daughter, whom he must protect from other (wacky) patrons. I can't decide if the understated and unresolved tragedy at the end diminishes the work for me or makes it better art. Strange but fascinating all the way through. Three and a half stars.

(And the author's biopic! Is she a stagecoach robber? What is going on there?)

Corey says

It would not do to go into too much detail, as much of the joy of *The Incident Report* comes from placing the pieces together, getting a picture of Miriam's fragility and strength only through glimpses into her reactions. The rest of the novel's delight lies in Baillie's precise construction of sentences, her wordplay and imagery delicately balancing Miriam's wistful view of the world with its harsher realities. Phrases such as "I lowered my eyes to the computer screen and read, but the words had become hollow gourds, little seeds of shrivelled meaning rattling inside them," eloquently capture the fragility of Miriam as she clings to rules and certainty over the increasingly chaotic world about her.

[Read the rest of the review here.](#)

Lyn Elliott says

This extraordinary little book will live in me for some time, I suspect.

The apparently simple format of a Toronto librarian's short 'Incident Reports' is a brilliant device that allows Baillie to present cameo after cameo of people and behaviours outside the square, people who don't fit into or actively reject social norms and structures. Libraries are usually seen as places where system unobtrusively prevails, and people quietly adhere to the expected norms.

Here, in scene after scene, we meet people who don't fit, people with mental illness of different sorts, people who abuse, threaten, or simply create mayhem, all captured in apparently dispassionate 'incident reports' written by the duty librarian, Miriam Gordon, who carries the classification 'Public Service Assistant'.

As the book evolves (the pieces are too short, separate and incomplete for it to unfold as a coherent story) we see fragments of Miriam's own life with her family and her lover, Janko.

Baillie's writing is deceptively simple, apparently flat, as it inhabits the format of the Incident Report. But it is full of imagery, often breath-catching. Behind incidents that are at first mildly baffling, there are increasingly threatening hints of the menace that fills Verdi's Rigoletto, never explained, never explicit, and the threatener undiscovered, not even really sought.

As befits the format, the central mystery, what I saw as a main narrative is unresolved, incomplete. I'd like to know more, but accept that I won't.

David Dacosta says

What constitutes a novel? Well, Martha Baillie has constructed something that shatters that traditional notion. *The Incident Report* reads like a series of diary entries by a peculiar librarian. Four plus years ago, a favorable review of this book appeared in an alternative Toronto weekly – *Now magazine* – and piqued my curiosity. Shortly thereafter, I searched the library database with no luck. The title hadn't been purchased yet, so I settled for Baillie's previous novel *The Shape I Gave You*. I appreciated *Shape* and somehow *The Incident Report* slipped from my mind as I moved forward in my pursuit of other books.

Like any big city, Toronto is a collision of different cultures and ideologies. The people who frequent the branch where Miriam is employed as a librarian represent this eclectic mix. Strange is the word that comes to mind when I think of the feel of this book. But luckily for me, I like strange, within reason. The literary rules have been discarded in place of an anything goes approach; random details about the lives of the library's staff and its patrons, and a refusal to commit to uniformity. The style of writing also embodies an experimental feel – “*Janko bent over me, and he ate until no more of me remained. All that remained of me was warmth.*” Not your typical description of a sexual act.

Read it. But have an open mind.

TinHouseBooks says

Jakob Vala (Graphic Designer): Martha Baillie's novel *The Incident Report* is structured as brief reports written by Miriam, a librarian in Toronto. The plot involves romance and mystery, but so far the most compelling bits are Miriam's descriptions of the library's odd patrons, which remind me (for better or worse) of my twelve years as a clerk in a small-town bookstore. [Editor's Note: Matha Baillie's upcoming novel *The Search for Heinrich Schlogel* will be published by Tin House in September, 2014, alongside an ebook of *The Incident Report*.]

5/14/2013:

Meg Storey (Editor, Tin House Books): I read Martha Baillie's *The Incident Report* in two sittings. Told in one-to-three-page chapters, Baillie's novel is the best kind of quick read: a quick shot to the heart. Miriam, the librarian-narrator, reports her interactions with the regular (and often slightly disturbed and nutty) library patrons alongside her own story of grief over her father's death and her slow willingness to fall in love with a man she meets on a park bench. She also keeps finding notes tucked in various places throughout the library; the notes are written by someone who believes he is Rigoletto, from Verdi's opera, and that Miriam is his daughter, whom he must protect. Despite its seemingly straightforward approach and distant narrator, *The Incident Report* is a nuanced chronicle of grief, love, and the tensions between our private and public selves.

Glenn Sumi says

You won't enter a Toronto public library in the same way after reading Martha Baillie's haunting new novel, set in a fictional branch in Allan Gardens.

The Incident Report consists of 144 reports, some long and detailed, others haiku-like in their suggestive minimalism. They're all filed by Miriam Gordon, a librarian in her mid-30s whose cautious and detached demeanour make her an objective report-taker. Initially, that is.

Then she meets Janko, a mysterious cab driver/artist from Slovenia, who becomes her lover. At around the same time, she begins receiving letters hidden throughout the library from a man who claims to be Rigoletto, Verdi's tragic hunchbacked jester. This unseen man - part of the book's pull comes from wondering who he is among the assortment of characters - believes Miriam is his daughter Gilda, whom he wants to save.

Bibliophiles will appreciate Baillie's evocation of library life, from bizarre Internet requests to post-masturbatory cleanup sessions. Baillie is a clear-eyed chronicler of various forms of mental illness.

She also layers the novel with images and motifs, suggesting that these reports could be taking place in the narrator's own mind. More clarity on that point might help, however. And what does Miriam love about books?

Read this in one or two sittings so its gallery of colourful characters feels as real as people you pass on the street every day.

Originally published in NOW Magazine: <https://nowtoronto.com/art-and-books/...>

Cindy says

I picked this up at the library firstly because of the fine paper it is printed on (a rare delight), and secondly because of its novel concept of telling the story. The book uses 144 incident reports like the ones which Toronto Public Library workers fill out to report notable and questionable incidents at the library (like patrons who remove all the books off a shelf, or men who beckon to patrons from outside the library's windows).

I found this format perfect for the main character Miriam's descriptions of her experiences with these incidents, which were very funny; Baillie is an acute observer of character. However, this is not all the book is -- there are also storylines involving Miriam's personal life and other library employees, though they did not flesh out *nearly* satisfactorily enough for me, and the ending was a let down.

Kit A. says

Required reading for anybody who has worked or is currently working in a library! The narrative is told through a series of numbered incident reports, which are structured more like mini chapters. While I agree that the main character, Miriam, an employee at the Allan Gardens branch of the Toronto Public Library, can seem emotionless at times, I found her dry and subtle humour added so much to the challenging and absurd

situations at the library. Her patience and diplomacy in handling difficult patrons is absolutely admirable. An engrossing and quick read with stories and characters that will stick with you.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

This is now my second book from the exquisite small Canadian publisher Pedlar Press, after Jacob Wren's *Revenge Fantasies of the Politically Dispossessed*; and this is just as impressive as that one, a poetically beautiful text but with quite a dark streak as well, in this case centered around a Toronto public library that somehow almost by magic manages to attract each and every batsh-t crazy person living in that entire city. The story itself, then, is told through a series of "incident reports" that the libraries must fill out, every time a homeless man takes a whizz on a couch or a pervert gets caught looking at online porn; then as the manuscript continues, we see that it's actually starting to tell more and more of a narrative story about one of the staff members in question, the "reports" now covering not just library events but moments from her love life, as well as an ongoing mystery regarding an anonymous stalker with a violent streak who starts leaving notes around the building for her to find. As usual with Pedlar, the results are erudite without being pretentious, creepy and charming at the same time, the whole thing put out with the care for fine materials and clean design that this press is known for. It comes highly recommended, and has me now looking even more forward to my next Pedlar title, Michael Boyce's *Anderson*, which I'll be tackling next week.

Out of 10: **9.0**

Jim Puskas says

Most of this book is poetry masquerading as prose. No matter, it's utterly unique, whatever you name it. Baillie recounts a host of bizarre "incidents" at the library where she works, involving a number of very strange "patrons" many of them clearly nuts, others just lost souls. Some are hilarious, some simply droll while others are sad and pitiful. Meanwhile Miriam, the narrator lets us into her developing relationship with Janko, an immigrant who, unable to make a living from his talent as an artist, drives a taxi. Baillie's prose is often breathtakingly poignant; her flat observations of events without any commentary are starkly compelling. And her evocation of the process of grieving (Incident Report 131) is surely the most heart-wrenching of any that I've encountered.

Tuck says

1. pedlar press 2. a novel made of library incident reports 3. 5 star cclap review
you tell me what's not to like?

clever, affecting novel of a women taking the chance to reach out to other people, specifically taking a lover after many years a solitary. Intertwined with her story are incident reports she has made at her job as a librarian, reports of all the crazy, nice, vile, and ridiculous people who use public libraries. The ultimate question i see author is asking is if we reach out to other humans, but then are shunned, stunned, repudiated for no reason, or repulsed by others' grossness, can we as "normals" ever find hapiness? no :(

thanks!! to CCLAP for PEDLAR press recommendations. i will follow.

Danya says

Anyone who currently works, wants to work, or has worked in a public library needs to read this book. Entirely made up of "incident reports," this is the story of Miriam Gordon, who works at the service desk in the Toronto Public Library. Miriam's reports chronicle her day-today encounters with customers, which encompass the hilariously inappropriate, disturbing and the poignant. From the man who sits on the floor and obsessively stacks books, to the Lavendar Woman who rants to Miriam about Americans and telephone operators, you will love all those Miriam meets.

Teresa says

4.5 stars

Such an affecting work of minimalism, and so hard to describe without giving away what should be experienced directly. The darkness of working in what I imagine must be a large urban library and the tentativeness of falling in love are juxtaposed in such a way that the climax, though perhaps a tiny bit predictable, hit me in the gut and had me rereading and rereading one rather short 'incident report' to see if I was, nevertheless, wrong about what I was reading.

It's also an impressive-looking book, with heavy pages and endpapers that are inscribed thickly to mimic a sheet of closely written numbers found in a library-return slot. I wouldn't mind owning the book; but of course I checked it out from my suburban library – happily, without incident.

Amanda Vance says

"Many incidents occur in public libraries,
and when one does the librarian in charge
is required to fill out the necessary forms..."

The Incident Report begins with this quote along with an example of a library incident report, setting the tone for the rest of the story. The book is broken up into individual incidents, which taken together, tell the story of Miriam's life. Library incidents intertwine with incidents within her life, past and present to give a feeling of who Miriam is and how seemingly random incidents at work translate into her life.

The story is beautifully written and the format and language give it a feeling of almost being prose. The format and language also lend a stark contrast to the content of the incidents. Some are shocking and many unexpected. Miriam's past unfolds as she relives pieces in response to notes she is being left by a patron of the library. Her present unfolds around her daily tasks as if it becomes a daily task as well.

I received this book as a gift. My mother found it hysterical that the author used so many of the same ways of discussing people that we use when speaking of them to others. Working in a public library, the events meant

to "shock" the average reader were more familiar and similar to my daily events. The way the author refers to patrons with nicknames such as Suitcase Man and Lavender Woman made me laugh. In many cases, you don't have names, merely descriptives and when you deal with incidents like these constantly there has to be a sense of humor and amusement about them to make it through some days.

It is a book about the library and the incidents that happen in the library so my mother will be happy that she found a book that made me laugh and relate the events to events that happen at all public libraries every day. But this story was about much more than just those events. This book can be enjoyed even if you rarely step foot into a library. I think it will be enjoyed in a much different way and also give the reader a glimpse into the world of their public librarians.

Anne says

I discovered this book when meeting Baillie at our local farmer's market, which we attend each Saturday. Baillie had the only 'wares' that were in book form, and was a total quirkball delight to chat with.

Toronto's Pedlar Press is run by one woman in her house, and sheesh, does she ever create elegant books - the paper weight on this one was lovely.

Anyone who's ever worked in a public library must read this book to find solidarity and deep humor. Anyone who hasn't ever worked in a public library must read this book to learn that public librarians are actually superheros.

And anyone should read this book to confirm and honor lovers Miriam and Janko's quiet worlds.
