

The Apparition Trail

by Lisa Smedman

APPARITION TRAIL
WHO SAID
WHAT

SF Site review

It's 1884 on the prairies, but a very different 1884 than the one in Canadian history books. Since a mysterious comet struck Earth's moon in 1877, magical phenomena have become real. For Europeans, this has manifested in the development of perpetual motion technology, which is swiftly replacing coal and steam on the partially completed Canadian Pacific Railroad. And for tribes like the Cree and Blackfoot, magic holds the promise of powerful spells to banish foreign interlopers from the plains and restore the vanishing buffalo herds.

When Corporal Marmaduke Grayburn is summoned to see RCMP Superintendent Sam Steele, he is dismayed, fearing his secret past has caught up to him and he will be discharged. Steele is interested in something Grayburn has kept quiet, all right, but not what Grayburn feared. The Mounties want to hear about Grayburn's paranormal and precognitive abilities because they are forming Q Division—an elite psychic task force.

Settlers, railroad workers and even Mounties are disappearing all across the prairies, and nobody knows how or why. Grayburn is being sent to investigate—a mission that will lead him along the strange and terrifying APPARITION TRAIL.

Canadian audiences will very much enjoy Lisa Smedman's alternate history setting and the many real historical figures who populate it, ranging from Sam Steele to Francis Dickens, (son of novelist Charles Dickens and a very inept RCMP officer) to a cameo appearance by Sir John A. himself. Smedman has done her research, and she does not neglect the Cree, Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Salteaux, Blood and Peigan tribes, nor skate over their brutal exploitation by the Canadian government, RCMP and CPR.

Fantasy elements of this story are appropriate to their setting. The sorcerer, Wandering Spirit, uses Cree spiritualism in his magic, while, among the Europeans, Smedman has a great deal of fun introducing perpetual motion machines, including redesigned train engines and air bicycles (held up by helium balloons).

This well developed background and a complex plot are the strong points of THE APPARITION TRAIL. Unfortunately, this is not a character driven novel, and Marmaduke Grayburn comes across as a rather stiff and colourless narrator until almost the end of the book (a problem somewhat exacerbated by Smedman's deliberate use of a formal 19th century writing style). I would have found the story far more compelling if I had known Grayburn's personal dilemma earlier, and had more backstory on the mysterious Blackfoot woman, Emily.

Finally, this is a nitpick, but a map would *really* have been a boon for those of us who navigate Canada these days by highways rather than river systems. — Donna McMahon

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Vancouver Sun

Saturday, September 11, 2004 — Donna McMahon, author of *Dance of Knives*

You may have run across Lisa Smedman in any number of places on the Lower Mainland. She's an earnest-looking brown-haired woman of 45, not one to stand out in a crowd. Wearing heavy-framed glasses and dressed in a shirt and jacket, she looks like the newspaper editor she is, but with jewelry in her piercings and her sleeves rolled up to display some impressive tattoos, she easily blends into the crowd at the Vancouver Folk Festival or a retreat on Hornby Island. In jeans and a T-shirt, she's equally at home in the gym, in a funky Main Street coffeehouse, at a meeting of fellow day-care moms or around a gaming table with a bunch of the guys from the Trumpeter Wargaming Club.

Smedman will also be in her element at Vancouver's annual science fiction convention next month because, with 10 novels published since 1997 and two more on the way, she's rapidly becoming one of the most prolific science fiction/fantasy authors in Canada.

Born and raised in North Vancouver, she earned a BA in anthropology from the University of B.C. but ended up working as a typesetter for a publisher. Deciding she'd rather not type someone else's writing, she went back to Langara College for a journalism diploma and has worked as a journalist ever since: at the Richmond Review, the Langley Times, Sounder magazine, and finally the Vancouver Courier, where she's now the editor of the East Side edition.

"Working as a journalist is a real boon to writing fiction," she says. "What other job allows you to sit down and talk, one on one, with as diverse a collection of people as bank robbers, professional magicians, astronomers and police inspectors?"

"I've gone for rides on a blimp, hovercraft and helicopter, been inside a smoke-filled 'burning building' that firefighters train in and been in several scientists' labs — all very cool experiences that most people never get to have."

Smedman's Ladner home is unremarkable from the outside, but inside it overflows with her diverse passions. There are cats, pug dogs, toys scattered by her two-year-old son and quilts made by her partner. (The two women married in July.)

The largest bedroom in the house is Smedman's office. Its bookshelves are jammed with paperback novels and reference books on science, archeology, Canadian history, the First World War, forensics, religion and mythology. There are paintings of dragons, a Star



CREDIT: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun
Lisa Smedman: 'I come up with a new idea for a novel, on average, about once a week.'

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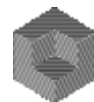
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Trek poster in Greek, a large plaster gargoyle. Three dozen model airplanes hang on threads over Ground Zero, her computer workstation. A large worktable is covered in half-finished modelling projects, and in the closet, clothes have been shoved into a small corner to make room for floor-to-ceiling gaming boxes, neatly stacked.

Smedman has been writing since she printed and stapled together her own books in elementary school, and she's been playing games since she was "tall enough to reach the table." She started with board games. Then a neighbour introduced her to wargames with tabletop miniatures.

In 1981, she discovered Dungeons and Dragons, the hugely popular role-playing game that spawned an industry, and soon became a veteran "dungeon master." In the late 1980s she started writing articles for Dragon magazine, and it was then that she got "the call."

"TSR [the creator of Dungeons and Dragons] called me up and asked if I'd like to try my hand at designing an adventure. Would I? Would a kid like to be paid to eat candy?"

Smedman is habitually serious, but when she grins, you can suddenly see that candy-eating kid. "The first adventure I worked on for TSR was Dragon's Crown which was [released] in 1993, and over the next three years, I designed 10 more adventures. Every morning when I woke up, I couldn't wait to get at the computer and start work.

"My editor's job at Sounder magazine had ended when that magazine was sold, so I was doing game design full time, and I loved it."

Like TV shows and movies, popular games have their own tie-in novels, written by authors who work in a "shared universe" with pre-established settings, characters and — in the case of gaming — complex rules. It was a natural progression for Smedman.

Her first novel, *The Lucifer Deck*, set in the "Shadowrun" universe, came out in 1997.

The backdrop was darkly fantastical, the cover art cheesy, and she was limited by gaming rules, but Smedman nevertheless drew on fears and uncertainties from her own adolescence to create deeply human characters. Her protagonist was a girl who suddenly found herself homeless on the streets after her middle-class family rejected her when she began morphing into a magical creature.

She says that although her family is supportive and loving, "I have known people who came out as gay in their teens and were utterly rejected by their families. Because I'm also gay, it's easy for me to imagine what they must have felt."

Although eight more books followed, one of which made the New York Times bestseller list this year, Smedman's latest novel is her first entirely independent work — a Canadian-published alternate-history romp called *The Apparition Trail*. (Alternate history, a fast-growing subgenre of science fiction, speculates about crucial points in history — for example, what if Hitler had won the Second World War, or in this case, what if something had levelled the power imbalance between native tribes and European settlers on the Canadian Prairies in the 1880s?)

The Apparition Trail by Lisa Smedman

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In Smedman's alternate 1884, magic has suddenly become real, and it manifests in culturally appropriate ways. The Europeans have developed perpetual-motion technology, while tribes like the Cree and Blackfoot can cast powerful spells. Faced with these new challenges, the North-West Mounted Police forms Q Division, an elite psychic task force, and Corporal Marmaduke Grayburn sets out by horseback, air bicycle and magical teleportation to investigate the disappearance of settlers, railroad workers and Mounties across the Canadian West.

"I love *The Apparition Trail* because it's the first novel I've had published in which I got to do anything I wanted," she says. "And I love the time period — wide-open prairie to explore, wonderful native mythologies, Victorian-era gadgetry, and so on."

She has many more books in progress, including another gaming tie-in, *Viper's Kiss* (scheduled for release in 2005), a murder mystery set in Vancouver and a young-adult novel.

"I come up with a new idea for a novel, on average, about once a week," she says. "I could never write them all."

"When people ask, 'Where do you get your ideas?,' I wonder how they can even ask the question. Ideas fill my head to bursting."

With our interview almost over, she is already starting to fidget a little. After all, she has a lot of things to do.

Vancouver Courier

It's always a pleasure to find a good piece of indigenous fiction, and to support the career of a Canadian author. This is especially true when the author actually writes science fiction or fantasy; Canada is severely underrepresented in both genres. There are not nearly enough Canadian voices in science fiction, and the Canadian presence in fantasy is also sparse.

Enter Lisa Smedman, a Vancouver-based writer and the *Courier's* East Side editor with 10 successful novels already under her belt. Smedman's latest, *The Apparition Trail*, is a heady combination of both historical fantasy and science fiction. The book offers us a wide array of real historical characters, in a setting which Canadian readers will find both familiar and strange. This is the Northwest Territories of the 1880s, which at the time included every scrap of land from the border of British Columbia to southern Ontario and Quebec. The action is set mostly in the area now known as Alberta and Saskatchewan, and those Prairies are full of their well-known turmoil and strife: all the traditional players are on the scene, from the newly formed Northwest Mounted Police to the famous Native chiefs. The difference is that in this alternate universe, magic exists. The old mystical powers, long dormant and believed dead, have suddenly returned full force in the fateful year of 1877.

The cause of this event is somewhat hazy; we know only that a passing comet struck the moon a glancing blow and turned the "dark side" toward the earth, changing the face of the night sky forever. The implications of the change are many, however, and Smedman explores them deeply in her novel. From the very first pages, the author makes it clear that we are no longer trapped in the mundane world of history books. The technology of this world is powered not by steam and coal, but by perpetual motion devices. These wonderful engines make all sorts of fascinating new machines possible, from a flying bicycle to a mechanical homing pigeon, or an eerily silent train.

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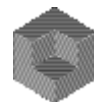
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The Apparition Trail is the story of Marmaduke Grayburn, a corporal in the Northwest Mounted Police. The year is 1884, and Grayburn's life is both difficult and dangerous. Tension increases daily between the displaced Native bands and the white settlers of the Northwest Territories. The Natives of the region are in dire straits. The buffalo have become scarce, and smallpox outbreaks are common. Three brutally hard winters have seen the people eating their own horses and dogs-sometimes even turning on each other. On the brink of extinction, their suffering has made them bold. More and more often, they make sorties against the settlers and the builders of the railroad, defying the white man's law and the men who are duty-bound to enforce it. Grayburn and his comrades in the NWMP have their hands full, trying to keep the peace.

Students of Canada's history will be nodding their heads up to this point. But the re-emergence of magic into this version of Canada's past has spiced up the scenario quite a bit. The same mystical forces that allow white men to create a perpetual motion device have also given force to the ancient spells and ceremonies of a medicine man. A Native shaman has the power to kill with his coup stick, to walk unseen, or transform himself into a spirit animal. Given enough cooperation, the Cree and the Blackfoot might even have enough mojo at their disposal to bring about the legendary Day of Changes, which was to the Native believer what the long-awaited Rapture is to a modern-day Christian.

In other words, we have a conflict of epic scale on our hands, with many lives at stake, and all the ingredients for a truly ripping tale of adventure. The author walks the tightrope between the two sides of this war with grace and sympathy, giving both the Mounties and their rebellious Native foes the humanity they deserve, and larding both sides with heroes and villains. In the meantime, she also serves up a fun, fast-paced yarn with several unexpected twists. The Apparition Trail is solid entertainment. —Arinn Dembo

Blether Review

This book is set in 1880s Canada, eh? But, in this world, the moon has acquired a slow orbit on its axis, due to being struck by a comet several years previously. Also, the secret of perpetual motion machines and magnetic locomotives have been discovered and put to practical use.

Corporal Marmaduke Grayburn of the Northwest Mounted Police is one of those building the western frontier. For most of his life, he has been plagued by prophetic dreams and "hunches," one of which saved his life. He is assigned to the secretive Q Division, a unit of paranormal investigators.

With help from an eccentric psychic researcher named Arthur Chambers, Grayburn investigates the sudden disappearance of a Methodist missionary and his family. Also gone is an Indian artifact of great power called the Manitou Stone.

These are hard times for the local Indian tribes. The buffalo, on which they depend, are almost gone. A Cree sorcerer, Wandering Spirit, plans to use the power of the Stone to bring about the long-prophecied Day of Changes, when the natives of western Canada will reclaim their stolen lands. Also included in this story are underground tunnels where time and distance work very differently than aboveground, and the spirit of a white buffalo forced into the body of a newborn child too early.

This novel is really good. Much of it is based on actual history. It's just weird enough to be interesting, the characters are real people, and it's very well done. It is well worth reading. — Paul Lappen

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The Apparition Trail
Lisa Smedman
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Steampunk meets Native American myth in Lisa Smedman's *The Apparition Trail*. In this lively alternate-earth novel, the world has been transformed by the discovery of perpetual motion, which permits the development of eternal generators and releases technology from the grip of wood, coal, and steam. Yet in the shining modern age of 1884, certain members of the North-West Mounted Police have begun to suspect that Native American magic may be something more than mere savage superstition. White settlers are mysteriously disappearing, and the Cree and Blackfoot tribes, traditionally enemies, have begun to band together in an unprecedented alliance against the inadequate policies of the Canadian government.

Corporal Marmaduke Grayburn has had premonitory dreams for years, and his superiors have finally taken notice. He's recruited into the new "Q Division" of the force, which consists of Mounties and civilians who share unusual paranormal abilities. Grayburn's first case is to investigate the strange disappearance of Reverend John McDougall, his family, and the legendary Manitou Stone that the reverend set up in front of his house. In the meantime, Grayburn must keep his own secrets from being discovered by his new superiors!

Gregariously narrated without slipping into comedy, *The Apparition Trail* combines steampunk devices like air bicycles and aerographs with Victorian-era psychic research and Native American legend. The novel swiftly plunges readers into a spirit world of white buffalo, shapeshifting shamans, the Buffalo Woman, and an apocalyptic Day of Changes in which the Native people will wrest their lands back from the settlers. Grayburn and the other members of Q Division must race against time and space if they intend to keep that Day from arriving ... but although the corporal has sworn to keep his people alive, he can't help but be affected by the Native Americans' plight. In the end, Grayburn must stand on the border of life and death and choose which people he will save.

Smedman has skillfully woven history and fiction together to create a vivid and memorable alternate version of the settlement of the North-West Territories that will appeal to a wide range of readers. I especially recommend *The Apparition Trail* to fans of the TV show *Wild, Wild West* or the roleplaying game *Deadlands* (some gamers might recognize Smedman's name from her novels and adventures set in *Shadowrun*, *Forgotten Realms*, and other RPG systems). *The Apparition Trail* is an entertaining and unusual novel, and I hope we'll see more of this alternative history in the future.

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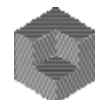
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The Alien Online

Premonitions, Air bicycles, Marmaduke Greyburn, Buffalo, Society for Psychical Research, A Day of Changes and more...

Reviewed by Terry Baker

The Apparition Trail is one of the most compulsively readable novels I've enjoyed in a long time. I loved everything about it. The title suits it perfectly and the cover art is perfect to capture the story's atmosphere, sense of drama and rousing adventure. And if these are not enough to convince you, the intriguing chapter teasers should be your next stop. Chapter One starts us off with events such as, *A premonition, Superintendent Steele's unusual request* and *Death on the sand*. Chapter Five promises *Inside the shaking teepee, Writing on Stone* and *Wise advice from an owl*.

This story could be bound in a sheet of black construction paper with no chapter teasers and you'd still want to read it as soon as you read the first paragraph. Lisa Smedman's writing is some of the best I've read. There is quiet confidence and effortless grace in each sentence. The first person narrative is flawless. Marmaduke Grayburn had me turning pages as though he were sitting beside me by a crackling fire on a cold night, telling the story aloud to a rapt audience of members of the Society for Psychical Research. Lisa's writing took me into the heart and mind of a police officer of the North-West Mounted Police on the first page and kept me there until the last word of the story.

The Apparition Trail is set in Canada's North-West Territories in 1884. (This region is now Alberta and Saskatchewan.) The Indians are restless. The Government has not kept its promises. Native prophets have predicted an exceptionally long cold winter. Knowing they could not survive yet another winter on the cruelly inadequate rations provided by Government, the tribes form an uneasy alliance to invoke their most potent prophesy, the Day of Changes. If they succeed, the buffalo which once filled the plains will return through powerful magic and unimaginable vengeance.

Marmaduke Grayburn is asked to join a unique, elite division of the North-West Mounted Police headed by the famous Mountie, Sam Steele. Their inaugural mission is to prevent the Day of Changes from happening. When Q Division discovers what the fulfillment of the prophesy will mean to the settlers who have usurped the lives and livelihood of the peoples who were there first, they realize the magic the Indians possess is more cruel and deadly than they could ever have dreamed.

In describing *The Apparition Trail* in an Afterward, Lisa Smedman explains: "The Apparition Trail is an Alternate History: an attempt to answer the question of what might have happened had magic awakened in the world—enabling Native rituals to produce concrete effects and European attempts to create perpetual motion devices. With magic the history of the Canadian west would have been greatly changed."

Lisa Smedman has woven fact and fantasy into a rich and captivating look at a grim chapter in Canadian history. There are no tedious passages of history to navigate. The story is wonderfully realized and convincing; a delicately altered past that spirals in to a far more satisfying resolution than reality afforded the First Nations.

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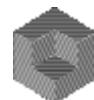
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Through Marmaduke's eyes we see the past. We gain insight into the quiet resolve and dignity of Chief Big Bear, and the power of Wandering Spirit. We see the clothes natives wore, taste and smell the ceremonial pipe they smoked. Native rituals become valid and vital when Q Division suffers their consequences. Marmaduke reveals the pride the NWMP held in their work with every button he polishes. He allows us to understand the conviction for law, justice and mutual respect men like Sam Steele brought with them into the vast landscape of the prairies. That these were men of character is the fact in the fantasy; it is through their honorable actions that the fantasy of the story gains verisimilitude.

I will leave it to you to discover the fate of the fictional Marmaduke Grayburn as he travels *The Apparition Trail*. Of the real man Lisa tells us, "Marmaduke Grayburn was the first North-West Mounted Police constable killed in the line of duty." I am convinced he would be enormously proud of his 'reincarnation' in *The Apparition Trail*. — Terry Baker

Praise for Lisa Smedman

Despite ten published novels Lisa Smedman remains one of Canada's least recognized Science Fiction/Fantasy names, largely unknown outside of Vancouver. Perhaps it's because she belongs to so many communities that hardly overlap. An enthusiastic gamer, she's made a successful career in role playing game design (an almost entirely male industry). She's a 20-year veteran of the Vancouver Courier (where she is currently an editor/columnist). She's a well known member of the local science fiction community. And she and her partner are familiar faces backstage at the Folk Festival.

Last year, Smedman's novel "Extinction" (an Advanced Dungeons & Dragons novel) made the New York Times bestseller list for hardcover fiction. And now she has a new title out: "The Apparition Trail", a fantasy set in an alternate history version of the Canadian prairies in 1884.

"The Apparition Trail" is a doubly Canadian novel. Smedman's painstakingly researched setting is in Alberta/Saskatchewan during the building of the CPR, and she exploits real historical characters and the very real conflicts between European settlers and missionaries, displaced Native tribes, railroad builders, and the RCMP. And the novel is published by the Tesseract imprint of Edge Publishing (Calgary), a Western success story and now Canada's largest English language SF publisher. — Donna McMahon

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