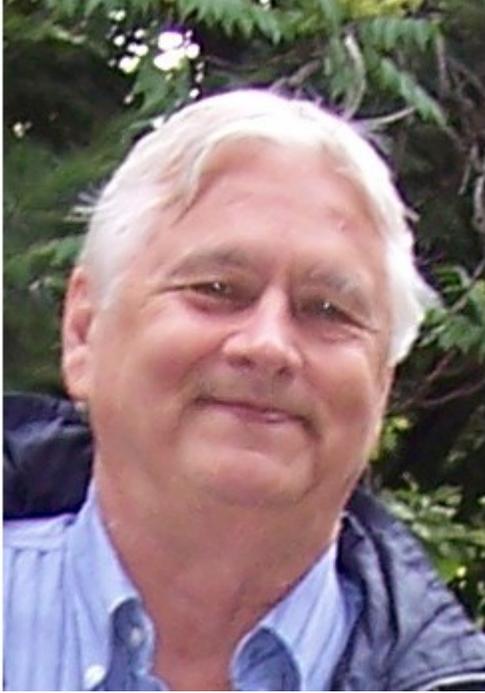


# Nothing Sacred

Review by [Kimberly Bourgeois](#) • Published in the [Fall 2016 issue](#) • [Leave a comment](#)



Everything in Italy is “old and broken,” says Suzanna’s niece, encapsulating a motif in Keith Henderson’s latest novel. Suzanna can relate. It seems everything about her life in Montreal is crumbling, too. When her ex-husband threatens to curtail support payments, the newly divorced forty-two-year-old must scramble to find a job – no small task since she long ago abandoned her studies for motherhood and hasn’t worked outside the home since. To top things off, she needs to make frequent trips to Acqua Sacra, in Italy’s Abruzzo region, where, at her mother’s request, she has taken charge of restoring the family home after an earthquake. Through it all, the heroine struggles to salvage her relationship with her teenage sons along with her self-esteem. Her ex, Len, is a conniving accountant and selfish cheat, yet sheepish Suzanna perceives her “failed” marriage as a personal shortcoming rather than a chance for emancipation. Phone calls to her sons only intensify her self-reproach: “After she hung up, one of those waves of guilt washed over her whenever she thought about her failed marriage.”

*Acqua Sacra*, which follows *The Roof Walkers* (2013), is Henderson’s fourth novel and sixth publication with DC Books in Montreal, where the author also acts as Managing Editor. His short story collection, *The Pagan Nuptials of Julia* (2006), which focuses on English-speaking Quebecers as a Canadian minority group, won a gold medal for best fiction from Eastern Canada from the US Independent Publishers Book Awards, and his collection of political essays, *Staying Canadian* (1997), stems from his days as political columnist for the *Financial Post*. Quebecers may also remember Henderson as the leader of the now-defunct Equality Party, through which he fought for English- language rights during the 1995 Quebec Referendum.



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Keith Henderson  
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Politics clearly inspire this author's work, and *Acqua Sacra* makes no exception, zeroing in on themes of public corruption and multinational delinquency. When Suzanna is pressured by her ex to take a job with a Montreal law firm, she finds herself unwittingly witnessing, and thus entangled in, underworld schemes involving mafia infiltration, locally and abroad.

Suzanna's dire predicament, and the tough moral choices with which she is faced, spark the reader's interest, though her character could be better fleshed out. Only a third of the way into the book do we finally get a brief, incomplete description of her physical appearance. Her internal dialogue also lacks definition, leaving us little chance to develop empathy.

Still, some will enjoy the book's whistleblowing tone as Suzanna uncovers and denounces wrongdoing. While this is a work of fiction, Henderson's imagined underworld calls to mind real-life events, giving the novel a timely feel. It's only been a year since the release of the Charbonneau Commission's report, for instance, so issues of corruption in Quebec's construction sector are still fresh in people's minds. Certain parts of the story, conveyed from the point of view of Suzanna's shady boss, Robert Bliss, will inevitably stir up Montrealers' memories: "He was as aware as anyone of concrete falling off provincial bridges and killing innocent people. Was that the kind of place he wanted to live in?"

Thanks to a bizarre scene in which Suzanna is knocked unconscious by a sheep in Italy, the heroine may strike the reader as a metaphor for a world that's had the wool pulled over its eyes, but, despite itself, is starting to see. Alluding to Psalm 51:8, she muses that things are undoubtedly broken "so that they 'may rejoice,' probably in the mending, that small, humble fixing and repair people everywhere had to care about." Ultimately, Suzanna's struggle and apparent misfortune serve as catalysts for new levels of awareness and growth, suggesting that things sometimes need to fall apart before they can be built back up, stronger than before. **mRb**

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