

## The Peculiar Life of the Lonely Postman by Denis Thériault – review

There is a charming playfulness to Thériault's prose in this well-executed story of love found through letters and deception



Poetic skills flourish in Thériault's novella Photograph: David Sillitoe for the Guardian David Sillitoe/Guardian

WB Gooderham

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Shy, unassuming Bilodo is a Montreal postman with a secret. Forsaking physical relationships, he chooses to live vicariously through the personal letters he intercepts and carefully steams open in the privacy of his flat. One correspondence interests him especially: an epistolary flirtation, conducted via haikus, between Grandpré, a local academic, and Ségolène, a young Guadeloupian teacher.

Bilodo finds himself falling in love with the sensitive Ségolène, and when, in a Nabokovian twist, Grandpré is run over while attempting to post his latest haiku and dies at Bilodo's feet, the postman decides to step into the deceased's life to ensure the long-distance relationship continues. As Bilodo's poetic skills begin to flourish, so does the affair, the haikus gradually becoming more accomplished and revealing as Bilodo's grip on his own identity becomes increasingly tenuous. Translated by Liedewy Hawke, there is a fable-like simplicity to Thériault's prose and a playfulness in the narrative voice to temper any moral queasiness that may be inherent in the subject matter. Quirky and charming with a well-executed denouement, this novella brings to mind nothing less than a giddily-lovesick Kafka.

To order *The Peculiar Life of the Lonely Postman* for £7.99, go to [bookshop.theguardian.com](http://bookshop.theguardian.com) or call 0330 333 6846.



Quebec writer Denis Thériault's second novel sank without a trace when it was published in 2008. Its republication could – and should – establish it as a lost-and-found gem with all the makings of a hit: a storyline about a haiku-loving, identity-stealing postman, with the romance – and sentimental whimsy – of a French film – *Amélie* with a twist of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. A beguiling story about love, loneliness and the modern world, crisply translated by Liedewy Hawke, all but the most hardened of readers will fall for the thrill, and the sadness, of this poetic, epistolary romance.

ARIFA AKBAR

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## A dying form of surveillance

KATHERINE HORREX

Denis Thériault

THE PECULIAR LIFE OF A LONELY POSTMAN

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There can be something decidedly fey about the haiku when put in the wrong hands. Its brevity, coupled with a subject matter that tends to focus on the natural world, can encourage whimsy, especially in the case of the modern form with its staple cast of frogs, goldfish and other aquatic creatures. But as Bilodo, the protagonist of Denis Thériault's new novella, discovers, the haiku as understood by its traditionalist practitioners is somewhat more complex. A successful example must find "the delicate balance between *fuuki* – the permanent eternity extending beyond us – and *ryuko* – the fleeting, the ephemeral that passes through us". For Bilodo, a young postman who forms a habit of steaming open letters and reading them before they are delivered, the haiku written by a Guadeloupian woman named Ségolène captivate him to the point of obsession.

As with the haiku, there is a certain quaintness about the idea of modern love conducted via letter. Epistolary voyeurism without computer technology is a dying form of surveillance. Thériault's juxtaposition of dark infatuation and quirky poeticism is, however, sufficiently balanced to avoid seeming hackneyed. The plot moves along a deceptively simple, surrealist trajectory, which has earned the author comparison with Haruki Murakami, though he is perhaps more indebted to Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, or even Oscar Wilde, with his harrowing, tragicomic twists and turns. Here the zen principle of *ensō* (the "circle") is misheard as "insole", in reflection of Bilodo's dubious impulse to "step into the shoes" of Ségolène's lover and correspondent, Grandpré. As far as pace is concerned, the book has something in common with the liveliness of Amélie Nothomb, in its smooth flowing from circumstance to circumstance.

The writing is peppered with delightful insights and analogies, such as the description of the haiku as being "stripped of superfluous words as though they were clothes dropped on the way to the bedroom". There is also a lovely turning point in the correspondence when eroticism demands the haiku be dropped in favour of the less restricting tanka. The lightness of tone does, however, eventually undermine the narrative, leaving us hungry for something more substantial, or surprising.

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