

# Milk Witch

by **Andrée Poulin**

Original title: Miss Pissenlit, published 2010, in French (Quebec).

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Andrée Poulin's novel *Enterrer la Lune* won the 2021 Prix des libraires and the 2020 Prix Espiègle; *La plus grosse poutine du monde* (2013) won the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award and the Prix Tamarac.

**About:** Manouane feels like she's the target of a whole village's hatred. Stigmatised by her mother's mental illness and desperate for her broken father's attention, she's ready to take her revenge. But her life is changed by the arrival of two newcomers - one, a vivacious Parisian who opens a lingerie shop in the strait-laced town, the other a teenage boy from Burkina Faso who she is dying to get to know. There's a first-love frisson, but the main theme is survival. There are no quick answers here, but there is the comfort of friends and the hope of a world beyond a teenage existence.

The book - acidic, hilarious, heartfelt - opens a discussion around living with mental illness. The first-person narrative, with its biting teenage dryness, creates a narrowness of perspective that allows glimpses of the pain of characters whose voices are unheard.

*Charis Ainslie is a freelance translator who works from French and Italian into English.*

## SAMPLE TRANSLATION

*Extract from Miss Pissenlit by Andrée Poulin (working title Milkwitch)*

I'm eaten by rage. I want to bite. To strike out. To smash something. I have to stop myself from slashing my pillow. Lobbing my cereal bowl against a wall. Sinking my knife into the ketchup bottle.

I'm sick of this place. Of the stupid, two-faced people who live here. Of what they say or don't say. Of what they do or don't do.

Today it was Justine Babin's turn to torment me. I should have seen it coming. I've been on the receiving end of her spitefulness before. So why did I let her stir up my shame? Stoke my rage?

We should have an understanding, Justine and I. We're members of the same club: the outcasts. We know the way people look at us: the morbid curiosity, the patronising pity, the mockery... After swallowing this bitter soup for so long, after years of rejection, Justine treats everyone around her like lepers. This morning, it was me she picked as her target. And she hit me right where it hurt.

It's all to do with my mum, of course. Every attack, every taunt relates to her. It's because of Clothilde that shame spatters over me like cowshit. That's just the way things are when your mum's a crazy-wacko-nutjob.

A few days ago, Clothilde had the brilliant idea of giving a statue of the Virgin Mary to the Babins. "That poor girl could do with cheering up," she said, with her usual annoying generosity. Did she secretly suspect that her gift would be unwelcome? Did she have a single spark of sanity left? All I know is that when she put that statue in the Babins' front garden, she did it in secret.

That evening, Justine's father rang. "Thanks, but no thanks," he told Clothilde. Could she come and collect her statue? Justine didn't want it in the house. My mother promised she'd go over first thing in the morning.

But the next day, Clothilde woke up thrashing about with a fever. Between coughing fits, she begged me to go over to the Babins'. "I don't want to leave the Virgin in a house where she's not wanted," she declared, making zero sense as usual. Then why had she left her there in the first place?

I wanted to go to the Babins' house about as much as I wanted to venture into a cobra-infested cave. The less I have to do with Justine Babin, the better. That girl – too beautiful, too cruel – scares me. But I had no choice. My mum wasn't going to calm down until she got her stupid statue back.

It was raining. An April rain, fine and ice-cold. I'd come out without a coat. Deliberately. If you're going to be miserable, you might as well be miserable to the core. I trailed reluctantly over to the Babin house, hidden by its thick hedge. A tatty old place with paint peeling from the shingled walls, and broken shutters at the windows. A house that resembles its occupants: morose, verging on the tragic.