

FICTION

Down to the bare bones

A Line Below the Skin

By Fran Muir

Turnstone, 192 pages, \$18.95

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Like all truly original works of fiction, *A Line Below the Skin* has its own carefully constructed internal syntax, its own particular and idiosyncratic language. Although Vancouver-based Fran Muir has previously pub-

lished a collection of short fiction, *Coming to Bone*, this is her first novel. It is a compacted story of women searching and gathering, of reclaiming neglected speech and forgotten history.

A middle-aged woman, Lily, talks to herself and her ailing mother as she pieces together fragments of geography and memory and family narratives. The book travels through various spaces, including an old-age home and a Toronto street riot, as well as

through Port Hardy, Winnipeg, Scotland and Buenos Aires. It also navigates among various familial permutations, especially circling around Lily's two daughters, Jan and Stephanie, and their absent father, Bruce.

Someone asks Lily what caused her mother's death. A portion of her answer, more a question to herself than anything else, is: "Secret stories carried in the blood and bones of the women we come from, women unrecorded and absent from history and their own stories?"

As I read the book, and Muir crafts it so that the reading must be slow and adaptable, it became a sort of elaborate synecdoche. Each word or image seems to encapsulate the entire book and the full breadth and depth of the book can often be represented by individual metaphors and allusions.

At one point, for example, a character talks about a moment in her "physical anthropology"; later, Lily talks about a voyage "inside a circling door of memory," and there are a race of Celts, we are told, who "neither read nor write, sing instead and dance, speak their stories, weave their past and future in the telling of it with their bodies."

What makes this book particularly complex is its masterful reliance on the particular — archival research conducted in Scotland, conversations with doctors, a walk through city streets — and its elliptical and expansive language, which refuses to provide all the answers but instead leads us through what Lily might call "a collision of meanings."

Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer.