

***The Shipping News.* By E. Annie Proulx. (New York: Scribner's, 1993. 337 p., \$25.50, ISBN 0-684-19337-X.)**

***The Bird Artist.* By Howard Norman. (New York: Fairar, Straus and Giroux, 1994. 289 p.)**

Brian Rusted

Volume 19, Number 1, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087658ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087658ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rusted, B. (1997). Review of [*The Shipping News.* By E. Annie Proulx. (New York: Scribner's, 1993. 337 p., \$25.50, ISBN 0-684-19337-X.) / *The Bird Artist.* By Howard Norman. (New York: Fairar, Straus and Giroux, 1994. 289 p.)]. *Ethnologies*, 19(1), 158–162. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087658ar>

Reference Cited

Brusendorff, Ove, and Paul Henningsen. 1963. *The Canadian History of Eroticism*. Copenhagen: Thaning and Appels.

JULIA KELSO
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

The Shipping News. By E. Annie Proulx. (New York: Scribner's, 1993. 337 p., \$25.50, ISBN 0-684-19337-X.)

The Bird Artist. By Howard Norman. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994. 289 p.)

George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have written *Arms and the Man* leaving blanks where the location would be mentioned. Only after completing the play did he set about finding an appropriate location and period. Place, as such an afterthought, is not something commonly associated with fiction, and certainly Joyce's Dublin, Laurence's Manawaka, or even Gibson's Cyberspace could bear witness. The suggestion, however, draws attention to the rhetorical means authors employ to convince a reader of their fiction's realism.

Fictional representations of place interest folklorists because they demonstrate the common currency of folklore and provide sites for the identification and collection of folk practice, free from the discomfort and muddle of fieldwork. *The Shipping News* and *The Bird Artist* are distinctive in their display of Newfoundland folklore, yet to appreciate them solely as bearers of folk traditions naturalizes the rhetorical labour of fiction. These novels also raise issues about the politics of representing culture.

What first attracts a reader in *The Shipping News* is E. Annie Proulx's use of language: not just English, but Newfoundland English. The damp is "roky", a dark look is "gledgy" and of course, mud is "duckety". Characters knit "thumbies", catch "guffies" or tap a "dottle" of ash from a pipe. It came as no surprise to hear Proulx confess in an interview with Peter Gzowski that while writing the novel, she "slept" with the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. Every page of the novel reveals her promiscuity but Proulx's affair does not end here. The strength of her other occupation — a travel writer — is

clear in the vivid, succinct strokes that reveal the novel's setting: "This place, she thought, this rock, six thousand miles of coast blind-wrapped in fog. Sunkers under wrinkled water, boats threading tickles between ice-scabbed cliffs. Tundra and barrens, a land of stunted spruce men cut and drew away" (p. 32). These two skills — fluency with local dialect and picturing a place with words combine as the characters develop and the novel's plot unfolds.

For teaching contemporary Newfoundland folklore, *The Shipping News* offers a compendium of examples. If the storyline — a recent widower and his lesbian aunt return to Newfoundland and reconnect with their ancestry through outpost life — were dropped, substantial examples of contemporary performance genres would remain. The novel's temporal structure of a year in the life of the characters facilitates this. Lobster fishing, berry picking, Christmas recitations all take their turn in the cycle of seasons. Cures (p. 25, 64), prognostications (p. 181, 313), magic (p. 45, 103), local legends (p. 84, 113, 181), folk names (p. 175), mat hooking (p. 181), mitt knitting (p. 305), chin music (p. 94), the old hag (p. 54, 208), rhymes (p. 175), foodways (p. 240) and more manage to get tucked in between.

Proulx achieves a wide tonal range, and it suggests her fluency with this folk material. The main character, Quoye, is reprimanded in no uncertain terms about the kind of boat he should have bought: "I told you to buy a nice little rodney, nice little sixteen-foot rodney with a seven-horsepower engine, nice little hull that holds the water, a good flare on it, not too much hollowing, a little boat that bears good under the bows" (p. 88). When rescued at sea and brought back to his boss's house for tea he sees the interior of "the house tatted and doiled in the great art of the place, designs of lace waves and floe ice, whelk shells and sea wrack, the curve of lobster feelers, the round knot of cod-eye, the bristled commas of shrimp and fissured sea caves, white snow on black rock, pinwheeled gulls, the slant of silver rain. Hard, tortured knots encased picture frames of ancestors and anchors..." (p. 213).

This poetic observation of domestic material culture encapsulates the central organizing metaphor of the novel. Each chapter has a particular emblematic knot from Ashley's *Book of Knots* which resonates with the action. Language is like a rope that when knotted with folklore makes a place. As Quoye discovers, there is "meaning in the knotted strings" (p. 210).

Part of that meaning comes from how Proulx's characters perform. Folk practices are not deployed just for decoration or to add local colour. Folklore is central to the novel's action. Both reader and characters keep going page after page to see if the traditional family home is renovated, if the handmade boat gets built, how the local legend ends, or to learn the origin of a

song. Beety Buggit's Christmas recitation about Billy Pretty's attempt to have his grandfather clock repaired is a good case: the characters do not just spout folklore, or display it for the confusion or edification of the reader. The characters are as wrapped up in the recitation as readers are wrapped up in the book. Auntie Fizzard, who is both character in Beety's recitation and audience member (and she might well be a reader of the book, too) passes a judgement on Beety's performance which could equally be passed on Proulx: " 'Not a word of truth in it,' she screamed, purple with laughing. 'But how she makes you think there was! Oh, she's terrible good!' " (p. 280).

Comments such as these remind the reader of the writing's reflexive quality. Quoye's own occupation is a newspaper writer. His personality is so bland that he inspires others to talk, and can juice "the life stories out of strangers" (p. 9). His favourite reading material is travel literature. When he starts work on the local paper, *The Gammy Bird*, he discovers reporters who have a habit of getting stories by listening to the radio, "it's only a stolen fiction in the first place" (p. 59). By the time his dark night of the soul has passed, Quoye has taken over the paper and has revised editorial policy so it covers strikes, demonstrations, and "good local stories" (p. 292) instead of bogus ads and fake car wrecks.

The whole knotted fabric of the novel shares in this self-consciousness about writing: the landscape of Newfoundland literally becomes a text. The site of the linerboard mill is a place called Hyphenville, a lighthouse beam "stutters", characters "scrawl" home after a night at a pub, seals on ice flows look like "commas and semicolons". This manifest sense of textuality is what makes *The Shipping News* interesting. The novel does not just contain folklore, nor does it simply narrate folk performances. The novel is also about the representation of folklore and Quoye's ancestry as a wrecker "that lured ships onto rocks...then strip[ped] the vessel bare" (p. 171-2) has aesthetic currency in contemporary writing. In postmodern style, *The Shipping News* depicts an imaginary place cobbled together from the sea wreck of Newfoundland folklore.

On the surface, *The Bird Artist* seems to share a similar preoccupation with folklore and representation, although in this case the central character is a painter. Set in 1911, Fabian Vas grows up in Witless Bay teaching himself to paint birds and watching his world unravel after his mother commits adultery with the lighthouse keeper. Implicated in a crime of passion, Fabian ends up painting a narrative mural of his community in the local church.

Despite the emphasis on painting, there are still ample opportunities for representing folk practices. The historical setting certainly favours this and

author Howard Norman's occupation as an anthropologist teases a reader familiar with Geertz, Clifford, Marcus, Pratt, Bohannon, etc., with the diverse possibilities. However, if Proulx slept with a dictionary to write her novel, Howard Norman might have had tea with a Gerald S. Doyle pamphlet. Not that cultural verisimilitude should be a measure in judging this work: it is a novel after all. Proulx herself cannot have won many friends with her hyperbolic treatment of place names (Capsize Cove, Cape Despond, Desperate Cove) or rendering Newfoundlanders as a crowd of psychic pirates and pedophiles. In Norman's rendering however, something is just off.

First, his sense of detail seems at odds with the realities of the time. What small outpost community at the turn of the century would have residents who routinely ate in restaurants, went to the store for fish, bottled milk, and French skin care products, carried revolvers to shoot raccoons, sold fish for an average of a dollar a pound, drank two bottles of whiskey a day, and took baths every time the going got tough? Fabian Vas's world feels traditionally suburban. Even as fiction, these eccentric details do not seem to add up to some authorial agenda. The folkloric content is either decorative or wrong.

Second, the characters appear to declaim their folk practices rather than live them. It is as if Shaw used Roger Tory Petersen as a ghost writer. Every character is very polite and thoughtful in addressing the reader when some fleck of local knowledge intrudes on the narrative. Politeness is epidemic with vocabulary: "Once in a while I hear Slieven — a deceitful person — whispered as I pass by..." (p. 241), or: "She looked out the window. 'It's duckish.' Helen Twombly liked that word; it meant the time between sunset and dark" (p. 221).

When it comes to representing customary behaviour, the characters are even more considerate. "One of the traditional festivals was Guy Fawkes Night, held on November 5. Huge bonfires were lit in memory of the attempt to blow up the parliament buildings..." (p. 211). Vas is able to provide a detailed description of the festivities on the night in question even though he did not attend "because I had been to them since I was four years old" (p. 232).

Treating folk practices this way makes the characters themselves appear as self-conscious interpreters, like gregarious bed-and-breakfast owners talking to the tourists. It is not surprising that some of this material is provided for the benefit of the outside forces of the law, or that the main characters describe themselves as "tourists in our own town" (p. 75). Imaginatively the lore is not part of their lives: it is part of their representation of their lives.

It is tempting to account for the differences between Proulx and Norman in terms of their divergent literary skills: good travel writing, bad anthropology. But such a judgement ultimately concerned with a question of authenticity misses a larger issue: who has the power and authority to represent and interpret a place, its culture and its people? This has been a vexing issue among literary critics and anthropologists for a decade and even though Newfoundlanders may not consider their folklore to be sacred or the property of particular members of the society, the question is still relevant.

It is banal to suggest that these novels appropriate or exploit Newfoundland folk culture. Yet they do signal the emergence of Newfoundland folklore as a textual commodity, a signifier slipping away from its lived context. The lore is not vanishing, but certainly is available as representation beyond the traditional reach of its performances. The question these books pose is not simply who is speaking, or who is spoken, but what/how is folklore complicit in this of representation and simulation.

BRIAN RUSTED
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta

The Quest for the Other: Ethnic Tourism in San Cristobal, Mexico.

By Pierre Van Den Berghe. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. 169 p., photos, bibliography, \$24.95 US, 0-295-973117-X, pbk.)

The Quest for the Other is a readable examination of the dynamics of ethnic tourism in the city of San Cristobal, on the uplands of Chiapas, in southeastern Mexico. The author defines ethnic tourism as one in which the tourist searches for the authentic, quaint, and pristine in an exotic culture of the host area. He examines the intersection between what he describes as the tourist's extraordinary world and the host's ordinary world (p. 6). The interaction occurs among three groups that have different cultures, class backgrounds and interests: tourists, natives that he labels "tourees", and middlemen. The author presents an analysis of ethnic tourism as a complex system of interactions taking place within a social context of interethnic encounters and exchanges. He points out that ethnic tourism brings together these three groups. The tourist is attracted by the "otherness" of the natives; the