

Michael Winter. *This All Happened; The Big Why.*

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early death of Rachel Kimor-Paine, a sequel to *Death Under Glass* will never be written. But I have it on the best authority that we can look forward to a second Kimor-Paine mystery novel, accepted for posthumous publication, but set outside Newfoundland.

Ruth Roach Pierson
Professor Emerita OISE/UT

Michael Winter. *This All Happened*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001, ISBN 0-88784-651-3; *The Big Why*. Toronto: Anansi, 2004, ISBN 0-88784-188-0

AN INTERESTING THING happened to Michael Winter on his way to *The Big Why*: he wrote another novel (“A Fictional Memoir,” to be precise), and called it *This All Happened*. Not that this is unusual for Winter: in an earlier collection of short stories, *One Last Good Look*, Winter’s protagonist is writing the diary that would become *This All Happened*. It is in that text the same protagonist attempts to write a novelization of American artist Rockwell Kent’s tumultuous stay in Brigus, Newfoundland. *The Big Why* is that novel. Though the first novel is planted firmly in the modern and developing genre of contemporary St. John’s novels (see Bowdring’s *The Night Season*, Moore’s *Alligator*, or Harvey’s *Inside*), while the other is the latest Newfoundland historical novel (*à la* Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *The Custodian of Paradise*, Crummey’s *River Thieves*, and Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*) both possess a remarkable quality: they both make compulsively readable the presentation of two rather unlikeable characters.

Now I understand in terming Gabriel English “rather unlikeable” I run the risk of offending the author, for it is well known (and this is where the “fictional memoir” part comes in) that the Gabriel of *This All Happened* is the literary alter-ego of Michael Winter (having apparently swapped the name of one archangel for another). It is also well known that most of the characters in this novel are renderings of actual people who actually populate actual St. John’s. It seems inevitable that in every conversation I have about this book, someone will point out who Lydia “really is,” or that she is “pretty sure” her neighbour is the “real” Wilf Jardine. I will leave such musings to those more familiar with the downtown St. John’s of *The Ship* and *Duke of Duckworth* where most of the action of this novel occurs.

Perhaps “unlikeable” is too strong a word for Gabriel, but he can certainly be annoying at times. Gabe spends most of the novel contemplating the slow death of his relationship with Lydia Murphy. The rest of the novel he spends contemplating everything else. Gabe is a *flâneur* — an urban idler who moves from bar to art show to house party without the cares of the nine-to-five. Gabe is “writing a novel,” though he actually spends very little time at the task. As a substitute for actual work,

Gabe begins to keep a day-to-day record of his life; thereby rather ingeniously transforming his idling into “work” — the collection of ideas, the conversion of the quotidian into art.

This All Happened abounds in idle wordplay, as if Gabe and his artistic though largely inactive friends must continuously reify themselves through displays of writerly observation. Gabe begins the entry for 4 March with “It’s after badminton, on the only day of the year that is a command, march forth” (*TAH* 59). He responds to a child’s comment that “A question mark is like half a heart” with “Sometimes questions are asked half-heartedly” (50). In a more bizarre moment, Gabe proclaims that “Corn ... is the lobster of the vegetable family,” then, when pressed to defend this statement by Lydia, actually takes time to list the similarities: “Theyre both large, I say. A solid colour. You boil them alive and theyre seasonal. You eat only a select part of the whole body. And pepper’s important” (100). These moments of artful insight are a way for Gabe and others to avoid dealing with their own idleness, to confer purpose and meaning upon moments and themselves. This text also teems with idle conversations that suddenly arise and then readily dissipate:

You are, I say, much more into the here and now than I am.
Lydia: Youre caught up in introspection.
Do you think introspection and regret are connected?
Are you regretting something?
I’m just following a train of thought. (135)

Gabe’s persistent observations and punning eventually grows tiresome for Lydia, who reveals as much on their canoe trip on the Exploits River:

Lydia: Take a gander at the map.
Me: You mean, take an exploits at the map.
What?
Gander River. Exploits River.
I knew you were gonna say that. (160)

These conversations and word games grow from idleness, and soon this is not enough to satisfy either Will or Lydia, who begin to look for new people and new experiences. *This All Happened* is about a man who seems to observe his life more than participate in it. It is an engaging examination of a man who eventually grows tired of his own inertia and decides to do something.

Gabe’s lackadaisical lifestyle is seen again in Rockwell Kent of *The Big Why*. Early in the novel, Kent claims, “I accept inertia and I can live within it for a long time” (*TBW* 30). Such idleness seems at odds with the community Kent now occupies, and is first playfully questioned by young local Tom Dobie:

Tom: So what'd you do today.

I walked around the town. I spent all day at it.

Tom: You must have walked around it twice. (104)

Kent is initially something of a marvel, a man who does not work. When hauling lobster pots with Tom, Kent admits, "I get up early, Tom. Because I want to lie in bed. And I work because I'm lazy" (154). Tom's response to Kent's confession reveals the world between these two men, for the option to stay in bed rather than work has never been presented to Tom: "That's a queer thing, he said. When there's a choice in the matter" (154). Tom finally reacts to Kent's idleness with something other than humour or bemusement when Kent lifts his son "little Rocky" onto his shoulders and wades out amongst the men of Brigus hauling caplin from the ocean. Kent has embraced his observer status, and for him, watching and sketching the activities of others is work. But now, as he stands by watching men struggle to bring their catch ashore, Kent is a man standing in the way of other men performing one of many tasks on which their survival depends. Pulling a net that has become "a heaving, independent bulk," Tom scolds Kent into action: "Put your son down and offer a hand there if'n you dont mind" (199). Kent is aware that he is living in a place where everyone must work together to survive, where a Newfoundlander "gives a hand and he gets a hand, and hardly a nod of the head to either" (17). Yet despite the help he receives from these people, the labour of Tom Dobie, the supplies from other neighbours, Kent offers nothing back but sketches and a tennis field he builds while others are working.

Though both novels are enjoyable, *The Big Why* is certainly the better of the two. Winter tackles historical fiction in a respectful but provocative way. The inside flap of the dust jacket claims this novel to be the "cool, sinuous, entertaining" historical fiction "we've all been waiting for." I tend to agree. The immediacy of the characters is no doubt owed to a technique Winter discusses in *This All Happened*: "I'm using Max and Lydia and others as these historical characters. Max is going to be my Rockwell Kent. My father might be Bob Bartlett. That way, I can be present in the past" (30). Spending the early days of the year in a friend's cabin in Heart's Desire, Gabe begins to absorb the locals into his novel: "I am going to use these boys in the novel. What they tell me I'll inject into the story" (18). Gabe's time in Heart's Desire is Kent's time in Brigus, the knowing laughs shared by the boys at Gabe's townie ineptitude are echoed in Tom Dobie's bemused reproach of Kent's unrushed lifestyle. Gabe leaves after a few days and remains an oddity; a welcomed, occasional visitor; Kent remains and becomes a nuisance, a disrespectful troublemaker eventually banished.

My favourite aspect of *The Big Why* is the treatment of the actual historical figures. In particular, Winter does some — interesting — things with Bartlett. If Winter's version of the explorer is based on his father (as Gabriel claims), then I would like to be a fly on the wall when that is explained at the next Winter family get-together. Winter also briefly inserts Joe Smallwood into his novel, a brief cameo of a man eager to please the elder Kent. Most interesting is Winter's re-creation of Judge Prowse, au-

thor of the seminal *History of Newfoundland*, and a character reduced to a deluded, doddering old man in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. In contrast Winter depicts Prowse as an authoritative and vigorous “well-built man” with the physique of an “Austrian skier” (*TBW* 217, 238). There is a haecceity to Winter’s Prowse, this is not Johnston’s time-ravaged, beleaguered historian, but a living, vibrant man existing, walking, hunting in the Newfoundland he wrote about.

Winter’s Rockwell Kent is wonderfully rendered. To narrate the novel from his perspective is to permit the readers to become intimately attached to this man yet still enjoy ourselves when he has his comeuppance. It is no small feat that Winter makes us care about a man who forces these sort of conversations:

Me: Do you think we’re good.

Kathleen: Yes, we’re good.

Me: We’re good and smart, aren’t we.

We’re not bad.

We’re smarter than most. We’re pretty important aren’t we. I mean, our friends think — they’re impressed by us.

I don’t think we should be saying this.

We’re just saying it to ourselves.

I’m not comfortable.

We’re not boasting.

But it could lead to something. It could affect us.

I just want it said. I want it acknowledged privately. (169)

Kent egotistically converts this island into a canvas for his own personal enhancement: “This here land is my outpost, and from here I’ll make my name” (17); and while we may be happy to see the locals refuse his colonial claiming, we still would like to see what kind of man he may have become if given the chance.

Both *This All Happened* and *The Big Why* revolve around a very flawed narrator not so much overcoming his failings as learning to live with them (Terry Goldie has called Gabriel English the male Bridget Jones). The result is two very entertaining and satisfying novels written in a very biting, rapid-fire form (though some may be distracted by Winter’s aversion to apostrophes). Fans of Gabriel will be excited to learn he will be returning in Winter’s upcoming *The Architects are Here* (I wonder if there’ll be apostrophes in this one?).

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Donna Morrissey. *Sylvanus Now*. Toronto: Penguin, 2005, ISBN 0143014250

COD WAS THE REASON Europeans first arrived and it has been the life’s blood of colony, dominion, and province. But Newfoundland in the twenty-first century has no