

Donna Morrissey. *Sylvanus Now.*

Terry Goldie

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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

cod fishery. Is it still Newfoundland? It certainly is not the Newfoundland found on the postcards. That represents the world of the bayman in the dory, before resettlement. The nationalists say it was confederation that caused the demise of the small outports. The rationalists say that resettlement was inevitable: people are social and if they can live closer to each other they will.

But in either case it is all about cod. When transportation for man was difficult it made sense to live as close to the fishing grounds as possible. The distance from education and healthcare was not a large issue as neither was affordable to the average fisherman. Fish processing was rudimentary so it was logical for the fishermen to salt and dry their catch immediately, in preparation for the long wait until the fish could reach its market. Thus the small isolated outport looked like it was clinging to the shore but it was actually clinging to the nearby codbanks. It is difficult to see how the arrival of universal education and medicare on the one hand and freezer trawlers on the other could have led to anything other than resettlement of one sort or another.

Not that this should stop one from decrying many of its effects. Donna Morrissey's *Sylvanus Now* is one long lamentation for the demise of that way of life. A blurb from *The Globe and Mail* calls her "A Newfoundland Thomas Hardy" and the comparison is apt. Like Hardy she represents a dark nostalgia for a bleak life. Sylvanus and his wife Adelaide live in outport Newfoundland in the 1950s. Their world seems perfectly representative of the old song, "And it's hard, hard times."

Adelaide had hopes of escaping this world through education, perhaps as a missionary, but this is clearly unlikely. Thus accepting the chance to be a fisherman's wife might be disappointing but it is also inescapable. With Sylvanus she need not suffer abusive drunkenness or invasive cheeriness. He lets her keep to herself as is her greatest need. His need is to keep fishing in as close to the age-old fashion as possible. He never overtly decries the motor on his dory but he seems likely to have preferred to row had it been possible.

From a less able writer this could have been just irritating. No one can live in the deep past. The best that any conservative can accomplish is to live in the near past. Thus Sylvanus is not rowing but resisting longliners and trawlers. He believes that being alone in his dory keeps him close enough to the mother sea that he is able to understand her demands and accept her bounty when she gives it. Thus the most powerful moment in the novel is when he finds himself in the middle of a trawler's by-catch, thousands of dead red fish. His anger is immense but so is the portrait of ecological disaster. Just how immense is suggested by Morrissey's epigraph: the beast of Revelations.

The disaster is physically grotesque and, in the fullest meaning of the word, visceral. This is true of the novel in general. The sex passages are opaque but overwhelming, the way one might assume sex would be in such an intensely contained world, with very sharp borders, both topographical and moral. The feelings are similarly intense. Sylvanus's obsession with the sea, which he rhapsodically anthropomorphizes as both

mother and lover, is met by his mother's fear of it, the power that drowned her husband.

Is all this "true"? I have no idea. Having caught one cod in my life and never having lived in an outport, much less a 1950s outport, I cannot say. The details of the descriptions, especially of Sylvanus's methods of fishing, of sailing, of filleting, of cooking, have the ring of authenticity. My guess is that Morrissey has done her homework, both in reading and in asking questions of those who remember these experiences.

Still, this love of the hardscrabble life reminds me so much of Michael Cook's plays. To call *Sylvanus Now* "Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance" would be accurate. For me, it is all just too full of the Irish curse, the belief that no matter how bad it gets, it was worse before and that was so much a better time. Slap me for being a rationalist but the logic escapes me.

Adelaide's name is not remarkable. It might not have been the most common baby name in the 1930s but it was certainly around. On the other hand, "Sylvanus" seems unlikely. Morrissey has claimed that the name just came to her but it would have been far more likely in the nineteenth century and far more likely in a more sophisticated family than the Nows. Morrissey felt driven to make her protagonist a god of nature and could not call him Pan.

The last name is even more striking. Perhaps "Now" is a Newfoundland name but I have not heard of it (I await correction from some onomatologist). Rather it is a Newfoundlandish name that suits Morrissey's purpose. Sylvanus is a person who lives in experience, a phenomenologist without the label. Yet, on the other hand, his desire to live in a simpler time suggests he is rather something like "Sylvanus Now-in-the-then."

So like many reviewers, I am torn. Morrissey creates a compelling portrait of two compelling people. Think of how few authors make that magic leap to produce life on the page. Morrissey offers viscera of both fish and people. And yet for me at least, the novel's belief in the pure hard primitivism of the outport world is too much. I would have appreciated at least a hint that modernity is not just a larger curse.

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Patrick O'Flaherty. *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933*. St. John's: Long Beach Press, 2005, ISBN 0-9680998-3-1

RECENT STUDIES HAVE effectively situated the history of Newfoundland and Labrador in a broader context. Peter Pope employed an Atlantic World framework to shake up our impressions of seventeenth-century Newfoundland in *Fish into Wine*. Jerry Bannister did the same for eighteenth-century Newfoundland in *The Rule of the Admirals*. Patrick O'Flaherty embarks on a similar mission in *Lost Country*: