

Carl Leggo. *Come-By-Chance.*

Ruth Roach Pierson

Volume 22, numéro 2, autumn 2007

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22_2rv09

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Pierson, R. R. (2007). Compte rendu de [Carl Leggo. *Come-By-Chance.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 22(2), 567–570.

“And after that, I knew I’d still be out there all by myself, looking everywhere for a small man wearing really big shoes” (“Big Shoes”).

In each case, the meaning of the protagonist’s experience is crystallized by means of a physical event interpreted definitively for us by the carefully deployed diction and imagery. The character may experience an old-fashioned epiphany (as in “Mapping”) or may be seeking one unsuccessfully (as in “Heartwood”) or may have authorial judgment blatantly brought down upon him (as in “The Latitude of Walls”) or may or may not get the point that the reader is expected to get (as in “Big Shoes” — does the narrator realize that he is, metaphorically, the “small man”?). But in each example, it’s all about the author spelling everything out for us.

There is, of course, nothing “wrong” with this sort of writing, but for me it involves a certain smugness, the sense that the writer is in some way saying, “See, I’ve done it just like Flannery O’Connor and Frank O’Connor and Katherine Anne Porter and the Joyce of *Dubliners* and all those other folks from fifty to a hundred years ago who get into the big *Norton Anthologies*.”

And maybe he has. But he could learn plenty from writers who haven’t been content with that — the likes of Richard Ford and Cormac McCarthy and David Foster Wallace and Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant and Leon Rooke and Douglas Glover and Norman Levine and any number of others.

Here’s hoping that he does, that the next Wangersky collection builds on the strengths evident here, and that the result is a more ambitious, varied, and artistically adventurous book than this one.

Larry Mathews
Memorial University

Carl Leggo. *Come-By-Chance*. St. John’s, NL: Breakwater Books Ltd., 2006, ISBN 1-55081-082-0

WHO HAS VISITED NEWFOUNDLAND and not thought how poetic the Rock’s very place names are — Cupids and Brigus, Conception Bay, Bell Island. How appropriate, then, that Carl Leggo, a Newfoundlander by birth, but exiled for years in British Columbia, has entitled this poetry collection *Come-By-Chance*. His poems fairly vibrate with longing for his only true home, “the geography of [his] growing up” (11). Living and teaching at the other end of Canada, he has not lost his love of “Jigg’s dinner, dark rum, cod tongues, stewed moose, fish and brewis” (10) and “the sun almost tucked into the Humber Arm” (16). Nor has he lost the ability to tell a good yarn, a gift those born and bred in Newfoundland seem to have breathed in from their earliest years with every gulp of gusty air off the Atlantic. Leggo’s

narrative bent serves him well in many of his pieces, especially in the prose poems like “Raisin Bread.” This compilation of vignettes reads like snippets of gossip about a local cast of characters. Here are two of my favourites:

Carrie asked Mamie Gill’s daughter, “How is your mother?” Mamie Gill’s daughter replied, “She was a hundred years old last week and she’s drowning in trivia.” Carrie, said, “I guess after a century, it’s hard not to.” (16)

Carrie baked bread at least once a week, and the bread was always charred on the bottom. Carrie always said, “This is the way Skipper likes it.” Skipper always said, “This is some good bread.” (17)

Narrative is definitely Leggo’s strong point, the narrative often culminating in a final one- or two-line folksy aphorism or down-to-earth maxim. The perhaps ironically entitled “Mary Maxim Sweater” is a case in point, ending as it does with these words of wisdom from Skipper: ““If you’re going to tell stories, you’ve got to know your audience”” (27). The recurring figure of Skipper is frequently given the final word, as in “Homework”:

When we studied
geography, Skipper said,
Wherever you go, know
where you come from so
you can find your way back. (26)

Leggo has a penchant for wrapped-up-and-tied-with-a-bow endings. The poem “Charlotte,” an elegy to a beloved basset hound, terminates in a list of lessons learned from the dog. The last: “Bark, bay, howl with a heart’s loud echo of each day’s bounty” (39).

While Leggo’s narrative poems frequently succeed, his attempts at the more lyrical sometimes sound as though designed to be broadcast through a loud-speaker in a sports stadium. Few poets are capable of the subtlety and finesse of an Ondaatje poem, but “Cinnamon,” by virtue of its title (the choice of which is puzzling given the fact the poem references not the aromatic spice but cinnamon hearts), can’t help but call to mind Ondaatje’s famous poem “The Cinnamon Peeler” and in doing so calls attention to Leggo’s own rather heavy-handed concatenation of similes. The poem takes the reader through a day’s changing colours as viewed in the Coast Mountains. Almost every one of these colours is described through comparison with a food, many strongly flavoured: “cranberry claret,” “raspberry light,” “molasses and corn syrup,” “honey mustard,” “sweet green relish,” “orange and apricot marmalade,” “red wine vinegar,” “jalapeno jelly,” “raspberry vinaigrette” (this after “raspberry light”) (42-43). The result for the reader is more stomach churning than evocative. But turning the page one en-

counters one of Leggo's delightfully terse, tongue-in-cheek narrative poems, "Poetic Licence" (44-45).

This poem would seem to demonstrate Leggo's full understanding of the statement by Canadian photographer D.R. Cowles which appears as an epigraph to the last poem in the book: "to see what is really there and to record it as it is — without dramatizing or striving for effect" (87). Unfortunately in too many other poems, Leggo seems unable to resist the pull of overly explicit adjectives ("specious spam promises of gargantuan penises"), of jarring combinations of allusions ("like Lady Godiva I can still let down my hair, dreaming / the thief dreaming me, Heathcliffe on a blustery bluff"), and jocular strings of alliteration ("the catharsis of confession, / the revelry of revelation, the apocalypse of admission, / the dalliance of disclosure"), all the above lines occurring in the poem "Bare Buff" (46-47).

The first and last stanzas of the poem "Coulees," in contrast, embody lovely lyrical touches:

Not much flows in these coulees,
except the cool dry wind claiming ownership,
refusing an easy hospitality. (48)

Succulents can find water where there is none,
suck the dry earth
like an orange sucks my dry mouth. (49)

Regrettably, too many of the in-between stanzas of this poem disappoint with pat word play or easy rhymes:

Prairie grass, sage and wild rye —
no sage would try to name
all the things that grow in these coulees.
The sun soothes with the winds,
woos me into sleep that leaves me woozy. (48)

I will conclude with an example of accomplished lyricism in Leggo's poem "Light Lines."

I want to learn how to breathe light,
to hold its scent long in memory, to hear
light seep into stone, to taste savoury light
on the skin and to know the language of light. (86)

On its own I find this synesthetic statement of longing moving. But coming as it does toward the end of the book, it is undercut, I feel conscience-bound to point out, by

570 Reviews

Leggo's habit of repeating sentiments and repeatedly using favourite words, like "light." By page 86 the reader will have already encountered: "shapes / of light and lunacy and love" (40), "the light lunacy of love in your eyes" (41), "figures of embodied light" (52), "writing always with the heart's light, / this poem also written in the light heart" (59), "you know the grammar of light" (63), "steeped in love's light" (77).

Sadly word combinations also get repeated. In one stanza in "Traces," Leggo writes resonantly: "The day is a Gerry Squires lithograph, / lines of light etched lightly" (78), and this use of light as noun and adverb enchant. But then, but four pages later, the reader comes smack up against a repetition of "light etched," now used to characterize stories (in "Spring," 82). But the word Leggo has an even greater weakness for is "heart," which we have already seen in combination with "light." The following is a long, but I fear not exhaustive list: "in the language of the heart's delight" (24), "the refrigerator door open / like a teacher's heart / when the final bell rings" (31), "I taught with fire in my eyes and heart" (33), "they know the earth's rhythms by heart, / they know the heart turned with earth's rhythms" (57), "with heart language," "heart's light" (59), "the light of the heart" (67), "heart's time" (67), "heart's rhythm" (67), "heart's light" (84), "resilient heart" (58), dandelions as "yellow hearts in the sun" (89).

I know poets of great stature have, through the repeated use of particular words, turned those words into a personal lexicon, a personal code. But, as in the case of Paul Celan, for instance, whose poems abound in the repetition of certain words like "stone," "almond," "ash," "snow," the symbolic weight of those words is rooted in particular (and in Celan's case harrowing) personal and historical experience. Their use has been (tragically) earned. To my eye and ear, Leggo's "heart" and "light" lack the necessary gravitas. I see that *Come-By-Chance* is Leggo's third book. In *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*, Louise Glück has written of her own practice, after finishing a book, to read it through, looking for settled habits, tics, in order to be aware of them before embarking on her next. It is advice that all of us poets would do well to heed.

Ruth Roach Pierson
Professor Emerita OISE/UT

Robin McGrath. *Salt Fish & Shmattes: A History of the Jews in Newfoundland and Labrador from 1770*. Creative Book Publishing, 2006, ISBN 1-89717-01-2

THIS BOOK IS A WELCOME addition to the growing number of texts documenting and recounting the history of Jews in Canada. From coast to coast to coast, Jewish Canadians/Canadian Jews are researching and celebrating their roots, producing histories, novels, poems, memoirs, and hybrid forms that suit the particularity of