

Craig Francis Power, *Blood Relatives*.

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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HERE IS A CHALLENGE: take your nice romantic vision of what you think Newfoundland Literature is, dress her up with a swanky skirt and a snazzy set of heels, tell her to bring her fiddle, feel confident with her under your arm, and then waltz her into The Spur, the grungy St. John's bar in Craig Francis Power's award-winning novel *Blood Relatives*, and prepare for little Ms. Newfoundland Lit to bitch-slap you.

Fair warning: Power's writing packs a wicked punch.

The first thing that might strike you is that Francis's protagonist and narrator, Charlie, is difficult to "like" in any traditional sense. Oh, he is full of self-loathing, self-pity, and self-deception — he wants you to feel sorry for him; he wants *everyone* close to him to feel sorry for him — but he is also, of his own admission, a bit of an asshole. This is not necessarily his fault, however, or so he claims. Charlie begins his story by telling us about his abusive father:

Dear old Dad, he used to beat us with a toy pistol Sam won at the fair, singing "Fee Fie Foe Fum, Fee, Fie, Foe, Fum," so drunk his eyes were bloody pools with black olives in them. And a troll's broken nose with broken capillaries. A little man under a little bridge. Dear Dead Dad. We buried him this morning. (16)

Charlie's "Dear Dead Dad" continues to haunt him throughout the novel, causing Charlie to act out in various ways. He admits three-quarters of the way through that he has gone around "pretending to be cursed by [his] old man because it" gave him an excuse for the way he acted: "It sure was easy to shrug off the blame for anything when my Dad was such a fucking drunk. I could always pass the buck" (211). Charlie is nothing if not a master of self-deception.

He can, however, see straight through everyone else's "bullshit," be it his girlfriend Nancy's artistic pretensions or his buddy Hank's outrageous Newfoundland nationalism, but he is not so good at owning up to his own crap — at least, not at first. For most of the novel we witness Charlie doing everything he can to distract himself from what he calls "The Fear" — the cold, deathly emptiness he feels behind his ribs. We, as readers, get that this void is Charlie's inability to love those around him, but all *he* seems to be aware of is that this hag-like oppression has reduced him to a depressed, sorry-ass, thirty-something, alcoholic janitor with erectile dysfunction.

There is little in Charlie's life that gets his blood pumping — that makes him feel alive — except for his increasingly frequent trysts with Theresa Douglas, The Spur's resident whore and mother of Gumdrop, a seven-year-old girl that Charlie, for some reason, feels responsible for. The only other person who seems to get a rise out of Charlie is Hank Kinsella, his dad's old drinking buddy and one of Power's most perversely hilarious comic creations. Hank is a raging drunk and devout New-

foundland patriot, who, Charlie believes, knows some secret about his father — something he hopes Hank will reveal in the course of Charlie’s “education.”

This “education,” however, eventually leads to Nancy leaving Charlie for a drug-using artist friend who wears leather pants, after which Charlie finds himself sleeping on a pull-out couch at his brother’s apartment, listening to Sam and his transsexual partner Eva romp in the next room. Still convinced that Hank has something worthwhile to reveal, Charlie continues to let Hank educate him on everything from the nobility of the Newfoundland dog to the thrill of three-way sex. Sure, time spent with Hank and Theresa gets Charlie’s blood going in one way or another, but he is never able to get rid of “The Fear” that his whole life is meaningless.

The only time that Charlie feels his body “being filled slowly with sweet white light,” so that the coldness behind his rib cage begins to disappear, is when he is lying on Sam’s pull-out couch, listening to his brother and Eva read to each other, imagining the first time they might have met and fallen in love. He imagines this, of course, in a bar, in a bathroom stall, under similar circumstances to those surrounding *his* first time with Theresa at The Spur. He wants his relationship with Theresa to grow into the type of loving relationship he sees his brother in. But the more he tries to convey this to Theresa — the more he tries to be an “uncle” or father figure for Gumdrop — the weirder things get, until it becomes commonplace for Theresa to take turns giving Hank and Charlie head while they all watch “Wheel of Fortune.”

Charlie has some sense that this is crazy but convinces himself that maybe “craziness [doesn’t] matter in people who [care] about you” (210). And he sincerely believes that Theresa cares about him; after all, when she comes over, she touches his face gently, tenderly, and she does the same thing when she leaves — after Charlie has paid his twenty bucks. Charlie is convinced that beneath the surface Theresa has a good heart; and he remains convinced that Hank has something to reveal about his father.

As the novel amps up to its riotous and raunchy climax, Charlie looks to both his relationship with Theresa and his friendship with Hank to find the meaning that his sorry life lacks. But when the table is overturned — when Charlie finally sees that what he thought was meaningful was actually bullshit — he is finally able to hope for (if not grasp) the “one good thing” that he lacks: love. Everything else in this blackly comic novel is, according to Charlie, bullshit: “the nice little fairy tale I’d been jerking myself off with” (283).

Craig Francis Power in this brilliant first novel doesn’t give us a hero — though Charlie wants desperately to be one for little Gumdrop — but he does give us a compelling, well-crafted story of a full-blooded human being: Charlie is a raw and irreverent asshole, yes, but he is also a young man learning to face his fear, learning what it really means to love and to be loved.

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