

## Joel Thomas Hynes. *Straight Razor Days*

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## REVIEWS

Joel Thomas Hynes. *Straight Razor Days*. Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2011, ISBN: 978-1897-141427

ACCORDING TO contemporary advertising campaigns, a razor ought to be purchased based on virtues of precision, comfort, and closeness. Far removed from the bygone ritual of a barber shop straight-razor shave, today's razors promise effective self-fashioning without the danger of having a steel blade threshed across the throat while sitting prone in the barber's chair, neck flexed upward to meet the blade being administered from behind the head. It is this bygone era, where the distance between beauty and scar tissue is measured in the faith one places in the most intimate of personal relationships, that Joel Thomas Hynes conjures in his first collection of poems, *Straight Razor Days*. Best known for his novels *Down to the Dirt* and *Right Away Monday*, as well as for his plays and performance roles, Hynes's collection of poems draws from his familiar (and somewhat tainted) well of images and characters, complete with petty thieves, substance abuse, street fights, piles of shit, blood, and the relentless posturing of a persona eager to affect bravado as substitute for identity. As we are reminded frequently and variously, his narrator "never needed a hand / when it comes to a violent act" ("Letter to Dermot"). However, in this collection Hynes's persona ultimately forgoes fisticuffs and slouches towards the redemption that comes with facing one's personal and familial history and embracing the "blessings" of the present.

The book is comprised of three distinct sections that loosely demarcate the first-person narrator's progression from self-loathing (or self-obsession, depending on the reader's patience) to self-acceptance. Composed in straightforward prosaic lines that recall the "dirty" style of Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver, the poems maintain a singular, and frequently cathartic, tone that transcends each section, opting for a diction that reflects vernacular speech patterns and forgoes technical innovation or prosodic virtuosity. In the collection's first section — "Exit 31" — we are introduced to Hynes's transparently autobiographical persona. The section pivots between a derelict past and a present where the narrator places himself within a troubled paternal lineage that forces him to confront his own role both as father, and as writer of family history. Just as razor ads appeal to the importance

of self-fashioning, Hynes's poems in this first section relentlessly fashion the narrator as a hyper-masculine, gratuitously violent, frequently alcoholic misanthrope who "cant imagine not drinking that dozen and / a half cans cooling in the well" ("In the Very Back Room") and is eager to "have fun with this shovel before they take [him] down" ("Book Burning"). Claiming little patience for things that "scramble [his] brain" such as "algebra, level and plumb, / ground wires, carbohydrates, / political theory / and literary structure" ("Dream of His Old Ford Custom"), the narrator feels more at home in a world where infections from dirty tattoo needles are treated with alcohol and sex: "There's talk of the hospital ... and then someone lays me / out in the wrong bed, brings me a glass of juice with vodka / from a bedside cupboard I hadn't thought to pillage. There's a / perfume, a softness I'm not use [*sic*] to, wet lips down there" ("All Black from Here").

Like the straight razor that Hynes uses as the collection's central metaphor, his repeated images of debauchery, as used to reflect the aimless hedonism of his narrator's actions, seem eager to cut as close to the grain as possible in an effort to reveal an essential, dark truth beneath a scarred existence. More often than not, however, Hynes's language yields a nostalgic sentimentalism more evocative of Norman Rockwell, whose image of a straight-razor shave is itself an iconic homage to both simpler and manlier times. This is particularly evident in "Around the Corner," where the speaker runs into Blair Harvey and opts to join him for "Not just Coke ... but the old time bottles, like the movies" while the two "lean against the shop front, drinking, / puffing away. It's like old times without the handcuffs." As a meditation on aging, the poem gives in to the parenthetical urge towards defining the self in tragic terms: "(Are you living the / way you hoped you could be? Sometimes I feel easier, more in control when I'm destroying myself and wearing down the people around me...." While this type of self-invention could be read as a metafictional analysis of the relationship between identity and art, it appears bereft of irony and self-deprecation, as revealed in images that lack consistency of conceit. For instance, we are told of the "derelict autism of the barrens" with little sense of why they are either derelict or autistic; likewise, the boastful narrator imagines that his father called to tell him "he heard I had a cock / to rival a French baguette," which in the context of the poem is meant to imply virility, while appearing to miss the obvious possibility that a baguette may well be soft and doughy.

As the collection progresses to the second section — "Book Burning" — some of the narrator's self-fashioned bravado begins to chisel away. Poems such as "Frank's Old Bedroom" offer sober meditations on fatherhood, while "Make Your Peace" grapples with the difficulty of expressing emotion within a moribund paternal setting. By the final section — "In the Very Back Room" — Hynes widens his cast of downtrodden characters to include a hitchhiker who "puts me in mind of my old grandfather" ("Believer"), a distraught woman in search of her runaway daughter who "squints down Lime Street at the gaggle / of housing units below" ("Mousey"), and a casual female encounter and rejection ("Residents of the Lower

Floors”). The characters of these poems seem to circle the narrator’s consciousness, at times tempting and at times tormenting him. It is precisely this effect that Hynes accomplishes in the section’s strongest poem, “Safe Place,” where he travels into the haunted recesses of his past, symbolized by a retreat to an old family home only to encounter the fabled Newfoundland Hag who “jammed a dead mouse down my throat / and I woke up choking the scream back.” The Hag as a figure of folklore aptly signifies the psychological unrest that this collection continually confronts and retreats from. The uncertainty behind the culturally moderated experience of sleep apnea means that there’s a suspicion the fear is merely psychological, and an anxiety that it is in fact something more hostile and real.

Yet this fear of hostility is also what is at times cloying in the collection. The foremost concern of Hynes’s persona seems to be what others have done to him, whether real or imagined. While he jibes that “rumour has it he’s behaved in a ghastly manner / before the cultured ones” (“The Writer at the Bar”), his affective self-fashioning seems to betray a veritable concern with those rumours. While *Straight Razor Days* effectively conveys the traumas implicit in coming to terms with a haunting past and a troubled present, its shave at times slides too comfortably over the wounds that torment its persona.

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Ronald Rompkey, éd. *Les Français à Terre-Neuve: un lieu mythique, une culture fantôme*. Collection Gulf Stream. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009, ISBN 978-2867-815560.

READERS INTERESTED in the emerging understanding of the French historical penetration in Newfoundland, Labrador, and Saint-Pierre et Miquelon will certainly welcome this new addition to the field. This book represents a well-chosen and enlightening collection of texts that pertain to the various aspects of the French presence and interaction with others in the region.

The collection could not have been edited by a scholar more prepared for such an endeavour. Not only is Ronald Rompkey the recipient of many prestigious national and provincial awards for his scholarship, but he has also published extensively as a biographer and an editor of various texts and memoirs dealing with elements of the French in *Terre-Neuve*. The present collection complements these previous publications with a comprehensive sampling of the available textual material.

Rompkey perceives *Terre-Neuve* in a broad geographical sense, including Newfoundland but also Labrador and the islands of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. In Rompkey’s view, too much of the narrative about Newfoundland and Labrador in particular has been told through English voices; this collection seeks to correct that imbalance. Implicitly, he is making an argument for the profundity of the French presence in the history of this region. Certainly, there are some visible contempo-