

Ed Kavanagh. *Strays*

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stances violent movements, have had on these cases. Both the UK (via Northern Ireland) and Canada (via Quebec) have had much stronger separatist movements than the ones the author examines. What impact did these other movements have on nationalism in Scotland and Newfoundland?

While it might be unreasonable to expect Thomsen to delve fully into all of these topics, he could at least have acknowledged them more explicitly. He also could have devoted more time in the conclusion to discussing the implications of these cases for separatism in other advanced democracies. Nonetheless, Thomsen's book is well-researched and well-argued, and offers a number of important insights for understanding modern separatism and nationalism in advanced democracies. His framework provides an interesting way of conceptualizing the process by which a nation and its aspiration are constructed. It is also very useful and could provide a better understanding of nationalism in developed democracies. Finally, the case studies are insightful and will be valuable to anyone with a particular interest in Scotland and Newfoundland as well as to those with a more general interest in modern separatist movements.

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Ed Kavanagh. *Strays*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1771030205

This delightful collection of 10 short stories was a finalist for the 2014 Newfoundland and Labrador Book Awards, and also for the 2014 Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award. The jurors for the latter described the book as follows:

In Ed Kavanagh's *Strays*, readers are treated to a rare breed of storyteller — a natural, one who spins yarns as effortlessly as he breathes. These stories feature a striking variety of characters who invite you inside their minds, only to provoke you with their outcast laments as they grasp for meaning and a place to call home. They start with the easy familiarity of an old friend, enchant throughout, and like an aged Scotch they finish with a soft burn.

Four of the stories have been previously published; four were winners in the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Competition. Obviously, the topic of strays has occupied Kavanagh for some time.

Stray dogs play a role in two of the stories, their tragic fates resulting from their partial adoption by people who have the heart but not the means to care for them. In each case, Kavanagh gracefully spares us the details of their demise. The first child narrator leaves the scene: “I beat it for a couple of hours.” The second is struck speechless: “I tried to call out to Brigid and Pauly to tell them to turn away, but the words got all tangled up in my throat.” The theme of the collection is stated directly at the end of the titular first story: “Maybe we’re all strays. Maybe we all need a few prayers. And, if we do, I don’t suppose it makes much difference who says them.”

This sorry state is certainly true of two widowed fathers who are barely able to cope, impoverished as they are both emotionally and financially. One is reduced to accepting the charity of in-laws who bear him some unstated grudge from the past. The other has his younger son take a verbal excuse literally and call him crazy. These men are in hurtful situations.

People of all ages are given voice in these stories, and are quick to perceive the irony of their circumstances. Kavanagh is a keen observer of human nature who treats all his characters with understanding and compassion. His varied narrative techniques — first person, third person, dialogue, dialect — flow along with a perfect sense of timing. You will laugh out loud at the punchlines, and be moved to tears by acts of kindness.

Kavanagh’s characters’ strong sense of place is most acutely felt when they are away from home. The young man who has gone to Toronto for work dreams of seabirds, of storm petrels, kittiwakes, and herring gulls. In a nice nod to songwriter Ron Hynes, Kavanagh also has the young man remember “a line from a song, ‘The St. John’s Waltz’: *And the seagulls are all dreaming seagull dreams on Amherst Rock . . .*” Likewise, the young woman who has moved from Bay de Vent to Ottawa to attend university feels strangely out of place in that city until the wind comes up, reminding her of home, “of the ocean outside her door, with its whipped turquoise waves.”

Perhaps what defines most of the characters as Newfoundlanders, though, is that quality often noted by people who come from away: Newfoundlanders have excellent social skills. They accept one another in all their rich diversity. One of Kavanagh’s characters is known as “the dreamy one,” another “the traveller,” and another “the strayaway child.” Sometimes, as with the young man who was “always dancing,” the role they played is not fully appreciated until they have gone away: “I finally got a letter from him the other day — well, a postcard. I didn’t realize I’d been waiting for it until it turned up on the supper table.”

While Kavanagh’s prose makes an effortless impression, it is actually very

carefully crafted, with plenty of alliteration and assonance, wordplays, contrasts, colloquialisms, and strategically placed repetitions, all of which make it a joy to read. For example, previous girlfriends were “windblown and wan”; rabbits and squirrels were “prancing” and “scampering”; father’s car was called the “Immaculate Contraction”; a dying baby alternated between “shrieking” and “silence”; and a young boy “went arse over kettle into eight feet of sh-*manure*.”

There is more to Kavanagh’s writing, though, than stylistic finesse and unforgettable plots. In an interview with Tara Bradbury, Kavanagh described what, in his opinion, makes a good story: “Something that’s more than just pure narrative. I like writing that has a transcendent quality — that achieves, as Hemingway put it, a kind of fourth dimension. Of course that’s very hard to do and so is quite rare. But it can be done.”¹

Kavanagh achieves transcendence in the long, final story, “The Strayaway Child,” in much the same way that he achieves transcendence in his 2001 award-winning novel, *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*: by introducing the archetypal figure of the sage, the wise, older person who appears when needed, teaches by example, and passes on, leaving behind a precious talisman suffused with light.

After Nipper’s father dies, the loner Brendan Flynn teaches him about poetry and the great outdoors. The novel ends with Nipper holding Brendan’s cross up into the light, “the bright silver reflecting the sun back to heaven.” After the strayaway girl’s mother dies, 90-year-old Annie Foran returns to town. “Like the lamps placed strategically around the room, she seemed somehow lit from within.” Her fiddle, too, “seemed somehow lit from within.” Annie gave the girl “a great gift,” her violin, and with it the gift of music. The music of Ed Kavanagh’s prose lights his characters from within, lending them a lasting resonance. *Strays* is a great book, a book to be treasured.

(Note: For future print runs, Killick Press should insist on better glue in the spine. Numerous pages have fallen out of my copy.)

Note

1. Tara Bradbury, “The Telegram’s 20 Questions,” *Telegram* (St. John’s), 8 Sept. 2014, A11.

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