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Bridget Canning. *Some People's Children*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2020. ISBN 978-1-55081-812-3

Midway through Bridget Canning's second novel, *Some People's Children*, the young photographer Jamie tells us that one of the other characters has "always got to yuck your yum" (155). When asked to explain the phrase, he says, "Like, judge your tastes." His comment reminded me that I was reviewing the book. It also convinced me that *Some People's Children* is a remarkably self-conscious narrative. By the end of the novel, Jamie's comment is obviously a clue about him that I did not notice at first (no spoiler here), but from the beginning the novel is asking us to attend to the details. It practically educates us alongside the main character, Imogene, as she goes through school and the school of life.

A realistic coming-of-age story or *Bildungsroman*, Canning's new book follows Imogene from the end of her childhood to her early adulthood as she learns how to deal with other people's "tastes" and expectations, sometimes in contrast with her own thoughts and feelings. In one of her classes, "everyone fails" (5) an assignment given to them by Sister Patricia (the novel being set in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Newfoundland was still in transition towards the current non-denominational education system). Instruction #1: "Read all the instructions before doing anything." Instruction #10: "Wait for the teacher to say go before doing directions 2 to 9." Although "Imogene didn't read the list well," she was already becoming more attentive after hearing her grandmother and great aunt gossip about their family dynamics and why her mother had birthed a child when she did. The big mystery in Imogene's early life is whether she was "the evidence" (22) or "proof enough" (224) of a sexual assault on her mother by a neighbour. The resulting themes of what is "true" and "who know[s] for certain" (11) reverberate throughout the novel as Imogene literally charts the possible outcomes of different imagined facts or situations. She does not become a detective, writer, or teacher before the book ends, but she gains their skills (and, precociously, a millennial's love for

lists). A good student, bookworm, and part-time employee at the library, she is almost a poster girl for New Criticism. The novel could certainly be read that closely, and it would be a perfect text in a wide variety of university courses, especially introductory surveys that tend to teach attention while focusing on relatable developmental and historical themes.

The risk of making self-conscious appeals to close reading is that it could seem didactic, but that's not the case with *Some People's Children*. There's never a wagging finger. Even Nan is ultimately open-minded, though she is the character whose status as a grandmother means that she is perhaps the most likely to be stereotyped as teacherly (as when she criticizes Imogene for appearing to play too much to her academic strengths near the beginning of part two). Nan invites Imogene's love interest, Jamie, to stay over on weekends, and she acknowledges that young adults need some late nights and late mornings. Similarly, when we might expect Maggie, Imogene's mom, to deliver a lecture, she says that she "confused grief with wisdom" (243) and did not learn as much from her traumas as she initially thought. Intellectual competence is a theme that intensifies as dementia begins to afflict both Nan and Cecil, the suspected neighbour, but the novel avoids oversimplified comparisons and solutions.

Its compelling realism develops out of complex characters and believable situations, and in *Some People's Children* the problem of money is an almost unavoidable motivating factor. Costs of tuition, housing, bills, clothing, entertainment, travel, etc. are repeatedly mentioned as the story progresses, so readers could easily interpret it through a Marxist or cultural-materialist lens, historicizing it alongside Newfoundland's colonial dependencies and its seemingly bottomless debt from a perspective of "the economically betrayed" (141). Indeed, one of Imogene's most questionable decisions is when she helps a boyfriend rob Cecil's house to seek financial compensation and vengeance for his alleged crimes. Can money bring justice? It does seem to help her feel better, at least temporarily, but she pretends that the new clothes she bought with the stolen money were gifts from her

mother and mother's wealthier boyfriend, implying that the older generation owes something monetary to the younger generation. Indeed, the novel does suggest that the influence of money is pervasive ("systemic" in that sense): Imogene remembers mispronouncing "self-deprecating" (157) by saying "self-depreciating" instead, as if our selves could be commodities that become less valuable over time. Jamie's solution to the problem of his elders is very different: he moves away (to Ottawa from suburban Mount Pearl), farther than Imogene does from her elders (given that Nan moves with her to St. John's from outport St. Felix's). Jamie's motivation is not money but his art of photography. He defines himself — his self — through art: "an artist . . . that's what I am" (208). The novel thereby offers the possibility of art as an alternative to capitalism, however implicated it is.

The art of this novel also deserves commentary. As I have remarked in other reviews, I love the images created by a simile or metaphor that balances on that line between familiar and fresh. When Imogene moves to town from around the bay, "she is new and rootless and plain, like dandelion fluff" (158). In another botanical figure, when Nan suffers a devastating loss, she confines herself to the insufficient comforts of her new room while "wadded tissues flower around the bed" (207). And in another writerly, self-conscious comment, Jamie offers what Imogene ironically describes as "the best metaphor for statutory rape resulting in pregnancy ever" (176), though I won't repeat it here. As a final example among an abundance of others, when Jamie jokes to his friends that he wants to "sow so many oats" (167) that he'd be like a cereal company, "they all laughed and [Imogene's] heart fell down a flight of stairs." In fact, much of the evocative writing in this novel is related to sex, desire, and friendship, which is only one of the reasons why it will be appealing to so many readers.

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