

Larry Mathews. *The Artificial Newfoundlander*

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## REVIEWS

Larry Mathews. *The Artificial Newfoundlander*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2010. ISBN: 1-55081-323-4.

IN HIS 2003 INTRODUCTION to *Essays on Canadian Writing*'s special issue on the Literature of Newfoundland, Larry Mathews suggested that Newfoundland's young, urban writers, including Burning Rock Collective members like Lisa Moore and Michael Winter, have "moved beyond" the thematic issues of "collective identity" that have historically preoccupied Newfoundland literature. Yet in his own first novel, *The Artificial Newfoundlander*, Mathews plays with themes of collective representation and belonging. A founding member of Burning Rock himself, Mathews uses biting humour and satire to show how issues of Newfoundland identity continue to survive in the urban setting of contemporary St. John's.

The protagonist of *The Artificial Newfoundlander*, Hugh Norman, is an English professor at Memorial University in his late fifties, and originally from the mainland. The novel begins "*in medias res*" — literally — these are the first words of the book. We find Hugh living with his reticent daughter, Emily, who has mysteriously left her husband with her two young children in tow. Hugh is trying to find out why she fled, tiptoeing through a relationship that has at times been strained. The mystery intensifies when Emily disappears, leaving Hugh to decipher strange clues and to contend with Emily's ex, who figures she left him because of either his position on 9/11 or certain problems with his "bird." Meanwhile Hugh reignites a romance with Maureen, an ex-girlfriend and feminist poet. Initially concerned about whether he should risk his chances with her by giving his real opinion on her new book, he soon develops a meaningful relationship with her.

Throughout *The Artificial Newfoundlander*, Mathews lampoons the academic life. The anti-social characters that make up Hugh's department, caught up in their own political drama, are just eccentric enough to ring true, such as the arrogant department pariah and the prolific publisher with a "scholarly commitment to post-everythingism." Mathews seems to have an academic audience in mind, as Hugh deconstructs his own writing and wades through the inflated language of faculty meetings. He endures the esoteric tribulations of the PhD oral, the "standard

combination of sophistication and tunnel-visioned gullibility that passes for intellectual achievement, the whole enterprise surrounded by an aura of not-really-mattering” — an assessment that seems applicable to scholarship in general. Hugh’s current research is on an obscure Newfoundland novelist, Father Alphonsus Cleary, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances in the 1980s. He spends his summer writing a guide to Cleary’s work for undergraduates, recognizing all the while that there is no demand for such a guide and that his “only real audience” is himself. “Of course,” he adds dryly, “I’ll be able to put it on my CV.” As the often pompous Hugh repeatedly meditates on Cleary’s obscurity, Mathews seems to be embracing a similar fate for his own novel. But while the dry observations of Mathews’ protagonist may be best appreciated by those familiar with academic life, his wit is what makes the novel worth reading; Hugh’s sardonic comment that the undergraduate’s defacing of book passages with yellow highlighters “seems always to carry with it an unintended allusion to urine” is one of many laugh-out-loud moments. “Is it too harsh,” Hugh wonders, “to think of these earnest youngsters as so many dogs, marking off their territory?”

When Hugh reflects on the parallels between Cleary’s fictional protagonists and the author’s own autobiography, Mathews seems to be goading his readers to draw parallels between Hugh and Mathews himself, also a professor of English at MUN. This wry play with issues of fiction and autobiography sets us up for the questions of identity that run throughout this novel. Hugh encounters a naïve “airhead” artist from the mainland who paints cod, though she has never seen one that hasn’t been cooked, purporting to “intuit what’s going on psychically” in Newfoundland. Maureen’s angry reaction to this appropriation exemplifies Newfoundlanders’ very real post-Confederation concerns about maintaining and accurately representing their “collective identity.” Yet the novel goes deeper than just poking fun at this kind of trite, exoticizing gaze. The title, *The Artificial Newfoundlander*, applies these anxieties to Hugh himself, also a mainlander, though one who has made St. John’s his home for eighteen years. If Hugh is a “Come From Away,” an “artificial” Newfoundlander, the title prods us to ask, what business does he have in St. John’s, researching a Newfoundland writer? And if Hugh is an “artificial” Newfoundlander, what is a “real” Newfoundlander? Almost all of the novel’s eccentric cast of characters seem to be acting out a role, whether it’s Foley, the son-in-law, a Marxist PhD student and Anglophile who has a habit of calling cab drivers “old boy,” or the blustering Dr. Barnabus Power, who clings to sectarian animosity and derides his townie colleagues in melodramatic, conspiratorial conversations. Mathews’ characters continually remind us that authenticity is rarely a human trait, that identity is always somewhat artificial or performative.

Raissa, a young flamboyant filmmaker, asks Hugh to participate in a project in which local artists respond to the only street left in downtown St. John’s (it remains unidentified) that has not already been immortalized in art. She wants Hugh to play the role of the “bewildered” mainlander, unfamiliar with St. John’s streets

and ignorant about Newfoundland music and literature. For Hugh, the request stings. And yet it is Hugh who tells her of Cleary, a Newfoundland writer she has never heard of. And it is Mathews who creates his own art in this city, by making St. John's geography central to his novel. The landmarks and street names continually root the novel in this space, drawn as a vibrant cosmopolitan centre where colonial history meets new cultural production. Beneath the acerbic one-liners and the cartoonish minor characters, then, the novel engages with the deeper topics of place, family, and literature. It prompts us to consider not where a person is from in determining who they are, but how he relates to the important people in his life, and how he makes a place his home.

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Chad Pelley. *Away from Everywhere*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2009. ISBN: 1-55081-265-3

CHAD PELLEY'S FIRST NOVEL, *Away from Everywhere*, is about the broken spirits and relationships of the Collins family. When twins Owen and Alex are still in school, their father becomes schizophrenic and is institutionalized; a few years later, their mother is killed by an abuser at a woman's clinic. The teenagers now pursue divergent paths: Owen as a writer, Alex as a doctor; one troubled and aimless, the other focused and successful. Now in their thirties, Owen destroys his connection with Alex by having an affair with his sister-in-law Hannah. The novel opens with a car crash in which Hannah dies and thus the affair is exposed: the time frame revisits the past, presents the weeks after the crash and relates the affair through Hannah's journal.

The novel is designed as a serious work, as a study of a family and particularly of a son in distress. Pelley quotes Tolstoy's famous opening statement in *Anna Karenina* about unhappy families to underscore his aims. The central difficulty for such a novel is to present human dynamics in a believable manner, a hard task. Pelley is most successful in his depiction of Owen, primarily because his actions are at the centre of the novel. He has interests and desires and much guilt. Yet his feelings do not often extend beyond the bounds of lust and lament: variety comes in the changing objects for both. Even if the emotional limitations of the character might be argued as the deadening affects of mental illness and alcoholism, some sense of a complete Owen is needed to contrast the decline.

The other characters exist, as is to be expected, as reflections of Owen. There are often fitting touches of observed behaviour in these depictions. Yet, they lack a completeness that makes them exist beyond their connection to Owen. The father is a sequence of bizarre and growing violent acts, then a human doll in the Waterford: a reminder to Owen of paternal love and a warning for the future. Twin Alex is