

Spectral Encounters, Sinister Warnings, and Uncanny Dreamscapes in Three Newfoundland Gothic Works

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REVIEW ESSAY

**Spectral Encounters, Sinister Warnings, and
Uncanny Dreamscapes in Three Newfoundland
Gothic Works**

KELLY DOYLE

Dale Jarvis. *Haunted Waters: More True Ghost Stories of Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1897317792

Charles O'Keefe. *The Newfoundland Vampire*. Newcastle, Ont.: Penumbra, 2011. ISBN 978-1935563853

Nico Rogers. *The Fetch: A Book of Voices*. London, Ont.: Brick Books, 2010. ISBN 978-1894078825

Traditionally speaking, Gothic fiction conjures familiar associations with the antiquities of Europe: labyrinthine streets, haunted castles, doubles, vampires, foreigners, monsters, and in the case of Victorian Gothic, the revelation of what Judith Halberstam refers to as “the secret or repressed center” of a narrative (Halberstam, 21). However, the Gothic is found not just in the confines of eighteenth-century and English fin-de-siècle novels, but in the local and familiar. Moreover, it permeates many cultures and regions across the globe and concerns itself in part with the dissolution of boundaries: between self and other, reality and fiction, the logical and the possible. Jarvis's *Haunted Waters*, O'Keefe's *The Newfoundland Vampire*, and Nico Rogers's *The Fetch* all present

a myriad of spectral voices from the dead, the living, and the imagined, which in turn comprise a unique reflection of Newfoundland Gothic that is regional, provincial, and particular.

As a follow-up to *Haunted Shores*, Jarvis's *Haunted Waters* explores the ubiquitous proliferation of spectres, ghosts, creatures, and local legends in Newfoundland and Labrador via a selection of dozens of stories collected from locals. As Jarvis states, "[Newfoundland and Labrador] is blessed with thousands of tales of hauntings, tokens, ghost ships, and strange creatures" (xiii). Rather fittingly, this is a book of voices and memories that merge seamlessly into a narrative style which is at once informative, richly descriptive, and journalistic. Jarvis has created a ghostly metafiction that bridges the observations of anthropologists, explorers, and everyday people across the province; it serves as a testimony to the ongoing and unique oral tradition of storytelling in Newfoundland and Labrador; what Jarvis calls a "living culture" (xiii). A glance at the book's contents reveals the startling plethora of Gothic and ghostly encounters in Newfoundland and Labrador: haunted houses, ghostly women, vanishing schooners and ghostly boats, sinister and peculiar geographies, spirit creatures, unexplained encounters, family ghosts, warnings and tokens, benign and malignant figures, and, of course, legends and folktales of fairies, jannies (better known, perhaps, as mummers), and the Old Hag. In his essay "Das Unheimliche," or "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud indicates that a component of the uncanny is discovering the strange in the familiar — what is known of old and is long familiar, and which can evoke feelings of fright, dread, or certainty. Gothic fiction, after all, is "designed to produce fear and desire within the reader" (Halberstam, 2). This Gothic feeling pervades *Haunted Waters*, rendering the Rock a place that for many is home, but is also a place where the strange and the unexplained make their presence repeatedly known in a way that both repels and fascinates.

One such tale that invokes the strange in the familiar and mundane is Betty Slaney's story of Uncle Moses Currie from Britannia, Random Island: after succumbing to a heart attack in a pothole during a nightly walk, Moses's ghost remains to haunt the pothole. Slaney's childhood fear of having to walk by "Uncle Mose" in the dark reminds the reader of a time before electricity chased away the shadows, doubts, and fears of the natural world, where "you went out in the dark. You either didn't go out, or you were scared and you went out and had to have friends" (Jarvis, 65). The fear of darkness and isolation are echoed in fears of "The Lone Mummer" (120). While mummering or jannying, a common Christmas home visiting tradition in Newfoundland and Labrador, is

typically seen as good-spirited and fun — people visit homes in groups and disguised in outlandish costumes, seeking a dance, a drink, and often inviting the hosts to guess their identity — the mummers are strange and uncanny; they hide their faces and are unsettling because they are unknown and stir what artist David Blackwood refers to as “ancient and instinctive superstitions against outsiders, the archetype of the ‘Stranger’” (120). A lone mummer visiting in the dead of winter is seen as even more of a threat; a harbinger of death for the New Year who appears otherworldly. Jarvis also relates first-hand accounts of the fairies or little people, whose legacy of leading people to become hopelessly lost can be traced back to the 1300s in England before being taken to Newfoundland. The book’s accounts of fairies in Trinity Bay and Conception Bay depict them as mischievous at best and malignant at worst; they can lead people astray and to dangerous places, return people somehow changed, and sometimes even kill. Still acknowledged and practised in parts of Newfoundland are methods of warding off the fairies, either by turning clothing inside out or by carrying hard bread in one’s pockets. These tales — folk legend and the oral tradition of contemporary testimony — provide readers with a gateway to the uncanny of Newfoundland and Labrador, where lines between the supernatural and the experiential worlds blur and dissolve. For instance, *Haunted Waters* traces the often experienced Old Hag, a nighttime terror in the form of an old woman or witch who torments the half-awake, paralyzed dreamer, back to the “Hellenic Hag” from ancient Greece. The Hag is a terrifying experience (speaking from personal experience!) that supposedly can be warded off using poems or the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer backwards. Rooted in the oral tradition of these stories is a reliance on words themselves, as well as a person’s faith.

Haunted Waters definitely does not shy away from the horrific and disturbing encounters of the living and the spectral in the province. One story relates the experience of hearing a shrieking unknown horror on Signal Hill in St. John’s. Others note the tendency for houses on Livingstone Street in St. John’s to be haunted: one woman remembers seeing a giant spectral face framed by black hair, smirking; another began hearing heavy footsteps in the dead of night; and in Larkin Square, things rattle in the closets or are mysteriously tossed around. Indeed, as a city that boasts the oldest street in North America, it is no surprise that St. John’s houses its fair share of spectral traces and presences. *Haunted Waters* is grounded in the physical world by numerous black-and-white photos of streets, houses, and communities where the stories take place, and yet, each photo is stark, and sometimes quietly and unnervingly menacing. The subject of each is typically mundane: abandoned houses, empty

streets, ships shrouded in fog, windows filled with impenetrable darkness, and skeletal tree branches clawing a sunless sky. The photos capture familiar places, but also a sense that the barrier between the safe and the uncanny is tenuous at best.

Haunted Waters documents the strange and wonderful as well as the threatening. For example, after the disappearance of two fishermen off Little Fogo Island in 1916, lost boaters are guided back to safety by their boat, which then disappears; and in a house on Long's Hill, St. John's, a house guest is covered in a blanket by a ghostly lady as he sleeps. Overall, Jarvis's collection creates a resonant patchwork of benevolent, frightening, and fascinating tales that pull the reader into a rich tradition of history and oral storytelling.

Like *Haunted Waters*, Nico Rogers's poetic and poignant *The Fetch* invokes the many voices and stories of Newfoundlanders, yet they and the stories themselves are part of a history and a way of life under erasure by changing times. Rogers notes that the writing of this book is "an offering to a heritage [he has] only ever known through stories" (118), and many of the prose poems here are interpretations of stories Rogers was told by people from his father's hometown in Bonavista Bay and around the island. Echoing and expanding on the storytelling tradition in Jarvis's collection of ghostly tales, Rogers internalizes the stories and memories of both the experiences and intangible emotions of outport Newfoundlanders and recreates/reanimates their voices, and the stories of his father, in the telling. Rogers invokes a chorus of generational voices, sometimes nameless and of varying ages, whispering in the reader's ear with the particular intonations and enunciations of Newfoundland dialect, like restless ghosts. As such, *The Fetch* is an appropriate title for this collection.

A distinctly Newfoundland term, a fetch is often understood to be a spirit sent to fetch the soul of the dying, and meant impending death if seen in the morning but a long life if seen in the evening (Jarvis, 118). It can also refer to spirits at sea that attempt to talk to sailors or control the ship. As a portent, then, the fetch, as presented by Rogers, haunts and moves the reader: it is the quintessential Gothic return of the repressed; its thematic presence suggests a spectral chorus of voices that converse with the reader and echo in the mind. Like Jarvis's collection, *The Fetch* tells part of its story through black-and-white photographs, but here they suggest moments in the lives of smiling people who are frozen in time and fading: the elderly, the young, couples, families, sealers, mothers, grandmothers. Many of the photos are damaged, weathered, textured, and imperfect. Yet, the photos of apparently peaceful outport communities, cod, boats, and so on are ghostly remnants of a Newfoundland fading from

memory, but that carries into the present via stories that reverberate against the battered cliffs and in the restless sea. Beauty and history are to be found here, but also hardship and sorrow.

Some of the voices in *The Fetch* are humorous, touching, sad, philosophical, nostalgic, and uncanny, but they all touch the heart of something integral to the spirit of outport life in Newfoundland. A sense of wonder is captured in stories like “The Deep,” in which the narrator wonders about the uncharted, unmeasured fathoms of his home harbour, Long Hungry. At moments, Rogers captures the divine in the mundane, as in “The Guts,” where a lifetime of using an outhouse over the sea “fetches” the soul back to the ocean. As the narrator claims, “I’ve gone to the sea prepubescent and I go to her in my impotent old age — and nothing has changed. I go to her because we are salt” (48). For the narrator, dying is merely a return and a rebirth, not an end. Of course, as any resident of Newfoundland and Labrador outports knows, making a living from the sea means a close personal relationship with danger and hardship: in “The Drowned,” the reader experiences the last moments of those lost at sea, becomes one with them, and “burn[s] on” (23). “Into the Light” locates the reader on ice floes, inside the dream of a young man enthralled by an enticing, ethereal woman garbed in seal pup fur who turns into a ghastly but irresistible nightmare vision. The eerie metamorphosis epitomizes the helpless and surreal quality of dreamscapes that can lure the dreamer beyond help or comfort, and create, as per the typical Gothic narrative, “a generic spin that transforms the lovely and the beautiful into the abhorrent” (Halberstam, 22). Some of the tales in *The Fetch* highlight the difficult life of fishermen and their rites of initiation. In the context of the “bottomless guts” of cod eating the capelin and seals eating cod, the narrator of “Down the Hatch” wishes eating and subsisting were as easy as simply consuming (96). Instead, the speaker outlines the lengthy list of needed provisions, the endless debt and months at sea, and the community effort required to have one day out of one year out of many when it is possible to fill one’s belly like the seals or the cod. In “Learning to Take It,” a young swiller (sealer) relates the abject experience of enduring a hunting season living and sleeping in greasy seal pelts and covered in lice, while another tale examines the bravery and initiation involved in jumping from one ice pan to the next (copying) and falling into the icy water.

Besides the stories of apparitions and hardship, however, there are moments of meetings, love, and bittersweet longing. Among the most poignant is “Touched,” the story of how Uncle Hump saves the life of a kitten he names Tilt, which becomes his friend, his comfort, and part of his very being (56-59).

In “Turning In,” the narrative revolves around a single chunk of large turnip; a deceptively trivial thing that serves as a testament to the love Ruth has for her 72-year-old, wood-chopping husband because it is a thing saved and savoured just for him. It is also a sensory and nostalgic conduit into the man’s youth, dreams, and memories that is aching close as he nears the end of his life. Certainly, every selection is emotive and carries oscillating notes of laughter, sorrow, and joy, but the sentiment in “On My Knees in the Flowers,” a personal anecdote shared by a Labrador fisherman, is perhaps most convincing of the particular melding of love and hardship on the Atlantic coast. This account describes the simple but powerful act of a wife who, seeing the raw and exposed knees of her husband, who kneels year after year in brine and fish guts, uses her flower-patterned nightgowns to save his knees. This memory of her makes the narrator cry every time he sees flowers, suggesting that life can be hard and painful, but also full of deep love and connections. The narrator speaks on behalf of himself and all the voices/photos of *The Fetch* in speaking of his wife. He says she is not someone who can just be let go of; she’s dead, but he claims “I don’t need no photo to remind me of that. I know she’s gone, but she’s still here too. It don’t matter if you don’t see her. I do, and it’s not foolishness, either” (109). The voices of Rogers’s prose poems encompass the living and the dead; they burn on; and despite the fading photos and receding history, they remain hauntingly present. With its undercurrent of childhood experiences and loss, connections forged, events endured, and dreams realized, re-dreamed, or forgotten, this collection is moving and lovingly crafted.

O’Keefe’s *The Newfoundland Vampire* is a significantly more lighthearted work despite its dramatic plot. What O’Keefe has ventured to do is bring one of the most iconic Gothic figures, the vampire, firmly into St. John’s and the surrounding area in the form of the luscious, deadly, red-headed vampire Cassandra. Born in Harbour Grace in 1793, she stalks 23-year-old Joe for the better part of a decade, seeking a mate and a protector from her former husband, John Snow, who has tormented her and killed Joe’s predecessors for 200 years. One of the delightful things about the book is the regional setting, where Newfoundlanders will have the benefit of recognizing O’Keefe’s chosen locales and being able to merge the narrative with their own experiences: Joe meets his vampiric destiny at Bitters, Memorial University’s graduate student pub, where he and Cassandra engage in the trivia night that often takes place there. Joe goes to the university and Cassandra lives in the residence in Hatcher House. They visit the Arts and Culture Centre, Joe’s parents live in Manuels, and the story carries the reader along the Outer Ring Road and other familiar streets

and locations in and around the city, made strange but full of the possible by the supernatural. The one noticeable lack here is the distinct accent in and around St. John's: adding a Newfoundland accent, particularly for Joe, would have solidly grounded the story in the city and foregrounded the difference between Joe and the more articulate, formal, and archaic speech of the vampire who enthrals him.

One of the more amusing regional touches in the novel is Joe's awkward negotiation between his principles as a vegetarian animal lover and his need, as a new vampire, to drink living blood. His first "victim," from which he feeds but does not kill, is a bull moose near Joe's hometown. As a vampire Joe is something of a moose whisperer, and he is able to enthrall and summon the animal (which becomes a pivotal weapon in a final showdown with Cassandra's ex-husband). Joe struggles with the moral implications of his new beingness, particularly since he refuses as a human to eat anything born and hatched, yet the novel has a simplistic engagement with the idea of vegetarianism that doesn't explore the moral relativism involved in equating the drinking of animal blood as a form of vegetarianism, which is rather disappointing. The same mistake is ubiquitous in similar narratives, such as Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, in which the Cullens consider their decision to refrain from human food as vegetarianism. Since Joe has a cat named Ginger, there were ripe opportunities to explore more fully, in ways both serious and humorous, the particular problems and struggles Joe faces.

In O'Keefe's novel, the vampire is the epitome of the ideal self and a monster made secular: according to Cassandra, vampires are not undead, not necessarily evil, and exist as a precursor to Christianity, rendering impotent the effect of crosses and holy water. Silver and decapitation, however, can kill them. Secularity and the weakening of religious talismans are certainly proliferating in current pop culture,¹ but problematic here is the lack of explanation: while the story positions vampires as outside Christian ideology, the traditional vampire is very much related to and entrenched within it. Silver is traditionally understood as a cure for lycanthropy or fatal to the vampire, particularly because of its purifying properties; the vampire, then, is still considered abject, impure, unclean, and unholy due to its liminality. Unique to the story is the ability of vampires to grow younger or change their physical appearance over time while they sleep. In the macrocosm of the story, Dracula and other powerful vampires appear, interestingly, in the guise of people good and bad from history and pop culture: Adolf Hitler, William Shatner, and Leonardo da Vinci are a few that contribute to *The Newfoundland Vampire's* playful surrealism. Vampires can also eat food without needing to defecate or urinate, and they

can choose to immediately become sober. As such, being a vampire gives one not just immortality, but the ability to make the best possible version of oneself, over which one has complete and appealing control.

In terms of intertextuality, there is a curious invocation of numerous pop culture shows, songs, and vampire myths in *The Newfoundland Vampire* that suggest O'Keefe's interest in the vampire genre's wide bricolage. In one scene, Cassandra's ex, John Snow, hears a few bars from the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," calling to mind the final scene of *Interview with the Vampire* (1993), in which Lestat (Tom Cruise) bites the interviewer (Christian Slater) and drives off in time with the same track playing. John Snow is equally threatening. The relationship between Joe and Cassandra is a kind of inversion of *Twilight's* Bella and Edward, in that it frames a fantasy novel with a male appeal in a similar way that Meyer's novel appeals to many females: it is the opportunity for the average guy in this case to meet his dream woman. Like Bella, Joe is clumsy (his attempts to help Cassandra fight are thwarted when he falls down an embankment), and he is a twenty-something everyman longing for love, a bit of a nerd and an outsider, who somehow becomes the object of affection for a beautiful, immortal vampire (as does Bella). Cassandra is a literal male fantasy brought to life, but she does stalk Joe, seduce him, and entrap him, even if she does love him. Like Edward in *Twilight*, Cassandra's self-serving (if seductive) enticements result in endangering Joe's friends and family, and separate him from them.

Sword-fighting, beautiful, sexually aggressive, intelligent, and open to numerous and often kinky experiences, Cassandra is able to transform this "average Joe" and play out his ultimate fantasies, but also manages to blind him to his own complicity. Indeed, with its fairly detailed sex scenes, the novel goes beyond the general sexual associations of the vampire and the acts of fluid sharing, sucking, and exchange to create a dramatic "Harlequin romance meets *Highlander*" for men (vampires in this tale all have swords, and some gain notoriety from seeking out and decapitating one another). Notably, Cassandra never appears threatening or emasculating; after all, she has initiated a number of men as vampires before Joe in her attempt to kill her relentless and abusive ex-husband. This is a feat that, despite her power and age, her centuries of weapons training, and her interest in women's rights, she is somehow unable to accomplish without the help of a new 23-year-old vampire lover. As such, the female vampire is relegated to the tired and rather reductive role of temptress and victim, whose only power and agency are located in her sexuality.

Worse, and somewhat frustratingly, the novel ends with a threesome

between Joe, Cassandra, and Countess Elizabeth Bathory. In history Bathory is counted among the first “real” vampires, a sixteenth-century countess who reputedly “tortured 650 virgins, bathing in their blood in order to preserve her youth” (Zimmerman, 379). In *The Newfoundland Vampire*, she is simply a vampire council member who comes to recruit Joe and Cassandra to track and kill a rogue vampire misogynist. The final scene is a tableau that reinforces female submissiveness and acquiescence to male desire; the scene is about female sexual appetites, but the orgy occurs mainly for Joe’s benefit in the safe confines of patriarchy. In speaking of the lesbian vampire myth, Zimmerman claims that “the sexual attraction of women can threaten the order of the male dominated society” (382), yet here, Cassandra and the centuries-old Bathory are kept in their place; Cassandra in particular, it is implied, needs Joe to confront the true holders of power (Commodus, Dracula, John Snow), who are all male. The unresolved tension the novel creates as it attempts to grapple with the mistreatment of women while juxtaposing it with echoes of the female as male fantasy figure is problematic, even within the rhetoric of vampiric sexuality. Overall, *The Newfoundland Vampire* is intriguing for its integrating the Gothic into the local, and certainly it is a fun read. From a critical perspective, it has some flaws in terms of its attempt to represent real contemporary topics such as vegetarianism and male-female relationships within the context of Gothic fantasy. This wasn’t my favourite work of the three, although it was my favourite in concept and is promising as one of the first Gothic/comic novels set definitively in Newfoundland and Labrador. I expect to see good things from O’Keefe in the future. Certainly, this is worth recommending.

The three books considered here all explore components of Newfoundland Gothic, from ghost stories to interpreted and inspired poetic reflections, to the contemporary pop culture imaginary of the vampiric in St. John’s. Each has a unique take on the notion of Gothic in the province, and they range in technique from a journalistic, popular presentation of oral storytelling to the free reign of fictional dreams and desires. All three books have something to offer, whether goose bumps, longing for times and people past, or fantastical titillation.

NOTE

- 1 Alan Ball’s *True Blood* and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* are two such examples where the crucifix has no effect (but in the former, in particular, silver does).

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