

***Rare Birds.* Edward Riche.**

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Rare Birds. Edward Riche . Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1997, 259 pp., French flaps, softcover, \$19.95. ISBN 0-385-25635-3.

HELEN PETERS

IN THIS FIERCELY CLEVER and funny book Ed Riche gives us the salient points of Newfoundlanders' past, present and probable future — the willfulness to hunt once abundant species to extinction, the capacity to eke out an existence on the management of what is left and the resourcefulness to niche market a Newfoundland version of the North American dream. This is no mean feat. Riche also presents, with political and artistic integrity, distinctions between urban and rural Newfoundland that do justice to both while showing life on the island in the grips of its typical prolonged wintery spring as hilarious yet essentially true.

The kind of humour which Riche portrays and the capacity to bring it out in dialogue and action is not unexpected from playwright Riche (*Possible Maps*, *List of Lights*) screenwriter Riche (*The Secret Nation*) and CBC Radio co-writer Riche (*The Great Eastern*). The disastrous dinner which Dave shares in St. John's with his former colleague in the Department of Fisheries, Larry Doyle (now a consultant peddling his services to his former employer at twice the price), and Larry's wife Moira shows the mastery of a writer accomplished in writing for performance. So too do the answering machine dialogues of Dave and his estranged wife Claire, who has left Dave for a right wing, think-tank job in Washington, D.C. which puts her periodically on CBC Television and which contrasts her material success with Dave's failure as he drinks his way through the impressive wine cellar of his empty restaurant, the Great Auk, near the community of Push Through, a scant hour's drive from St. John's. What is a surprise is the poetic quality of much of the description in the work, which gives the reader a heightened appreciation of the physical nature of Dave's world — his brain decaying in an alcoholic haze and his

body failing in impotency — a world that would destroy him were it not for his neighbour Alphonse Murphy (Phonse) who shows him how to seize an opportunity and make it a success with various bumps, grinds and convolutions along the way.

Dave had left his comfortable, highly paid, secure government job, and had, with Claire, sunk all their savings into a dream restaurant — a quality establishment overlooking the spectacular Push Harbour and designed to serve gourmet meals and the finest wines to patrons who failed to leave the comfort of their St. John's suburban homes after the first flourish of opening publicity. "No piece of salmon had ever been so delicately poached. The bouillon of champagne, herbs and scallions massaged the fish, which was then dressed for the opera in a butter jacket with caper buttons. The glistening pink flesh sat on a plate gilded with julienned vegetables that remained crisp and presentable in the heat. Dave wanted the table with the salmon to tell her deep-pocketed friends about her fah-bulous lunch at the Auk." It had not worked.

When the story opens Claire has gone, the restaurant is virtually closed and Dave serves lunch twice a week to Phonse in return for his companionship and for keeping the restaurant's driveway open with his purpose-built plough. Phonse, an outpost Renaissance man, lives well and happily, both with and apart from his fellow inhabitants of the Push Through area. Phonse reads the *Times Literary Supplement* and knows his way around library research. He has an abundant supply of choice game, a wife who cooks him succulent dishes, a neighbour, Dave, the would-be restaurateur, who educates and supplies his wine palate and a sister-in-law, Alice who comes to play a role in Dave's rapidly emerging new life. Phonse may call Haut-Brion "Hot Brian" but he has the capacity to seize an opportunity, to maximize its potential and to be an inventor of great achievement. His chief invention, a two-man submarine, with the sinister interest it has attracted, and his plan to rehabilitate the Great Auk lend much of the action of the book. In developing these plot lines, Riche draws on the recent history of Newfoundland as a haven for former Eastern bloc refugees defecting at Gander Airport from Aeroflot flights en route for Havana and the newish federal spy agency CSIS. In the process of working with this material, Phonse's inventive genius and Dave's often desperate clinging to his friend's resourcefulness, Riche successfully steers a fine line between the bizarre and the credible and hangs onto his reader through a complex and convoluted plot. One might wonder at the possibility of Phonse's building a submarine in his shed, but it's not impossible — primitive submarines were used in both the American War of Independence and the American Civil War. The first electric submarine dates from 1885 and must have been created under circumstances far more primitive than outpost Newfoundland in the 1990s.

Woven through Dave's involvement with Phonse in saving his restaurant is his developing relationship with Phonse's sister-in-law Alice. She expertly waitresses her way through the throngs of people who have come to patronize the Great Auk as a result of Phonse's ingenuity and Dave's excellent cuisine. She also confers

a new interest in life on Dave, lifting him out of his alcoholic and drug-induced stupor — “With a dark chocolate cocktail dress for a sail, Alice let the day’s heat carry her into the room. This creature was spinning tendrils around every sinew in his body tugging at the ropes that held him together. She ran her thumbs under the dress’s spaghetti straps, lifted the garment and shifted her body within, allowing Dave a fleeting glance of her breast.”

Rare Birds is a modern if not a post modern novel. It serves up for mainland consumption as well as for provincial, the evolution of Dave, Fuck-Up Man, into Dave Purcell, a middle aged man who is finally able to begin to put his life in order. He bottoms out in a very deep pit but is able to clamber up the other side. Among the Larrys and the Moiras who fail to see the illusion on which their lives are built and who continue to live its lie, Dave sees clearly and he is honest. Ed Riche’s quirky view of Newfoundland life on the brink of the millennium probably has a lot more to do with many of our lives than we care to admit.