

Susan Chalker Browne. *The Land of A Thousand Whales.*

Margaret Mackey

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Walsh's gift for imagery deserves special comment. Let me cite just one more of dozens of possible examples, this taken from "Homecoming to the End":

The open canvas flapped in the wind,  
billowing out like a blossoming magnolia (18).

In her first book of poems, Walsh wrote of falling, when young, in love with words as the keys to her existence, her kingdom:

The taste of salt was a word.  
I licked it, named it, rolled it over, loved it.  
Then wind, then my ocean, my sky (*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 23).

Walsh has remained true to that love in her second book, a mature woman's book that is suffused with memory, revisiting, reminiscence, loss, and revivification. As she writes in her long poem "Love,"

What to do when the only way forward for me  
is back, back in time through you and this house (34).

In *Going Around with Bachelors*, Walsh has beautifully demonstrated that for her the way back is the way forward.

Ruth Roach Pierson  
Professor Emerita OISE/UT

Susan Chalker Browne. *The Land of A Thousand Whales*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2006, ISBN: 1-897174-08-X

A LANDSCAPE CHANGES when it is peopled with stories, even when those stories are fictional. When we read a narrative, we move into the condition of not knowing how it will all work out. We see through the eyes of the story's characters, feel their anticipations and disappointments, look at their world as part of the conditions that make their story possible. Reading a good historical novel changes the way we look at a landscape; we see the possibilities that other characters saw. And creating that landscape in our mind's eye, as the result of reading the abstract black marks of words on the page, means that we see it as an imaginary as well as a real world. It is a surprisingly powerful experience.

The Labrador coast is not short of its own stories but there are still too few that tell of the incoming of the White fishermen. *The Land of a Thousand Whales* recounts the story of the Spanish whale fishery of 1580 from the perspective of 12-year-old Sebastian. Lured by what he perceives as the romance of "the land of a

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thousand whales” and profoundly uninterested in becoming a boatbuilder like his father, Sebastian stows away on a whaling ship headed for Labrador.

This short book tells of Sebastian’s adventures over a single summer. After he is discovered on the ship, he is put to work by the whalers. In the early stages of the summer he makes an enemy of an older boy, Ferdinand, and helps to kill a marauding polar bear. As summer wears on, Sebastian is promoted to the crucial position of whale spotter because of his keen eyesight. Running back to the station with news of a family of whales, he observes a fire in one of the rendering cauldrons. His ability to keep a steady head in this emergency leads to his being offered the chance to go to sea in a *chalupa* (a long, thin, canoe-like boat used to allow the harpoonists to converge on their prey) to see the whales up close. He gains his wish but also unexpectedly witnesses in close-up the death of one of the whalers, an event that changes his perspective on the whole venture.

It is a short story (only 82 pages of this little book are devoted to Sebastian’s story) and simply told. Nevertheless, Susan Chalker Browne manages to raise a number of complex questions. She is at her best in dealing with the landscape and seascape and their animal inhabitants. Sebastian relishes the solitude, the closeness to the whales, and the rhythms of daily life. He is excited to spot a family of whales but struck with the moral ambiguity of finding them only to slaughter them. When the death of the whaler (who was sitting beside Sebastian when he was swept into the ocean) is factored into consideration, the overall ethical and social picture becomes even more complicated. The simple language of this book is no impediment to conveying the complexity of Sebastian’s reactions. This component of the story is one of the major strengths of the book, and Browne makes no attempt to tie up every moral loose end as the book comes to a close — also a strength.

In such a short story, however, it is perhaps inevitable that some elements of the plot will be treated more fleetingly. The story of Sebastian’s short-lived feud with Ferdinand is not particularly well developed or convincing and I found it hard to care about their developing relationship.

This book tells more than Sebastian’s story, although that narrative represents the major focus of the book. At the beginning, the author offers us a glimpse of the romance of historical research. The whale bones piled up in Red Bay, Labrador suggested decades of hunting, but it took the additional clue of the orange rocks that littered the landscape to establish the story of the Spanish presence. When a historian, following directions written in 1576, arrived in Red Bay in the 1970s to see if it could possibly be the historical site of Butus, she identified the “orange rocks” as Basque roof tiles. At the end of the book, an author’s note provides information about the archaeologists who uncovered a wrecked whaling ship and located a cemetery mentioned in the story. She supplies useful details about which elements of the story are historically based and which are invented, and also reports on contemporary legislation concerning whaling.

The effect of sandwiching the fictional story between these two accounts of historical research enriches the book and provides its young readers with some idea of how we find out about the past. The story itself equips its readers with a new lens on that past. For a simple and relatively undemanding story, it achieves effects of some complexity.

Margaret Mackey  
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Linda Cullum, Carmelita McGrath, and Marilyn Porter, eds. *Weather's Edge: A Compendium*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2006, ISBN 1894294955

A COLLECTION OF ACADEMIC and creative works on women in Newfoundland and Labrador, *Weather's Edge* is a follow up to *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage* (1995). Featuring many well-known writers such as Bernice Morgan, Helen Porter, Lisa Moore, and Mary Dalton, among others, the volume also introduces the reader to lesser-known academics and women from Newfoundland and Labrador's past. Among the latter are Fanny Ryan Fiander, writer and journalist, Louisa Flowers, a Labrador resident who lived off the land, Moira Baird Bowring, upper-middle-class mother of four, and Labrador writer and diarist, Frances Pye. A dozen pieces tackle social policy problems that affect women's lives. Brenda Grzetic's "Between Life and Death" deals with the restructuring of the fishery and its effects on women who fish, a study that is complemented by Sharon Taylor's essays on the meaning of community in the context of TAGS (The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy) and Barbara Neis' and Susan Williams' "The New Right: Gender and the Fisheries Crisis: Local and Global Dimensions." Among the other policy studies, Jane Robinson reports on an initiative to change gendered housing policies to provide safe, affordable, accessible, and healthy places for women and their children. Brenda Kitchen reflects on the challenges of continuing sexism for women in the military, Lori Yetman contends that sexism has gone underground in the twenty first century and Donna Malone's study of young women, bars, and sexual violence makes specific recommendations on how to address the problem. Diana Gustafson's focus on the health of women and young girls provides some worrisome statistics about the province in general (Newfoundland and Labrador has the highest per capita use of food banks in Canada; the provincial rates for heart attack and strokes exceed the national rate by 20 per cent and 18 per cent respectively) and specific markers for women. In 2003, for example, life expectancy for women in the province was one and a half years lower than the Canadian average. Gustafson reminds us that inadequate incomes, lack of affordable housing, fewer opportunities for recreation and exercise, and food insecurity make it more likely that poor women will suffer from preventable illnesses.