

Gerard Collins, *Moonlight Sketches*.

Gina Granter

---

Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2011

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26\\_1rv05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26_1rv05)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Granter, G. (2011). Review of [Gerard Collins, *Moonlight Sketches*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 26(1), 129–131.

its unfolding without prejudgement, forcing us to assess the evidence and adjudicate the conflicting, even self-contradictory, voices as we go. Winter thus avoids predetermining the outcome and, more importantly, offers insight into how the pursuit of justice is complicated by fear, prior reputation, presupposition of guilt, self-protection, and the sometimes understandable, sometimes overzealous concern of authorities to protect the community from further harm.

For those familiar with Winter's work, this is a very different Michael Winter book, and readers looking for his trademark style — the supple lines, the offbeat characters, the vivid, idiosyncratic imagery — are going to be somewhat (but not entirely) disappointed. But like Winter's faux memoir *This All Happened*, and like his innovative variation on the historical novel, *The Big Why, The Death of Donna Whalen* shows Winter to be a writer willing to take some interesting risks, once again rewarding his readers as a result.

Herb Wylie  
Acadia University

Gerard Collins, *Moonlight Sketches*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-897174-70-8.

THE POPULAR IMAGE of rural Newfoundland is one of idyllic scenes of dories and docks, lobster pots and sunsets, saltbox houses and plaid-and-oilskin-clad locals with faces weathered by the wind and sun. This is the Newfoundland of tourism ads: the one that makes outsiders, worn out with the anonymity and bustle of urban life, gasp and sigh and long for the peace and quiet of a rural village. Those who hold this vision of outport life in their minds will be quickly disabused of it should they pick up a copy of Gerard Collins's short story collection, *Moonlight Sketches*, but pick it up they should. Collins's stories, while predominantly bleak, portray an immensely realistic rural Newfoundland brimming with fascinating and diverse characters and situations. Moments of dark humour and suspense make this collection an enjoyable and worthwhile read — if sometimes uncomfortable — whether or not Collins's fictional setting of the outport of Darwin is one that readers recognize as familiar.

The greatest strength of Collins's writing is his ability to imagine the inner thoughts of the most varied characters. Characters reappear in different stories, and minor characters in some become narrators of others. The highlights of the collection include "Tar Cat," "Exit the Warrior," and "The Sign," all narrated by the same character in various stages of life from child to teenager to adult. In "Tar Cat," David is a sensitive boy who feels powerless amongst his boorishly insensitive family members, including his cousin Benny, who tortures and kills animals as a disturbingly automatic and unfeeling compulsion. Benny's carnage is not unique, however; a fierce pragmatism and absence of sentimentality dominates the entire

community's dealings with animals, and the narrator is all too familiar with the methods by which people dispose of unwanted pets. This story, like many in the collection, underscores the limited range of gender identity available to residents of Darwin, as the narrator considers how Benny, just two years his senior, is "all man" for his ability to carry out killings, in contrast with the narrator's feeling of childishness for being nauseated by the deaths to which he is witness. Masculinity is equated with stoicism and indifference, and anyone who responds to events with feelings risks being labelled "queer." Appearing as a teenager in "Exit the Warrior," David explains that "Jokes about queers were always funny to [me and Benny] because it was one loser-thing we weren't. Those people were such outsiders that we actually felt sorry for them. In a strange way, our laughter was an expression of empathy." While the term "queer" is reserved for those considered to be homosexual, this statement illustrates the extent to which all people in Darwin risk being considered losers by virtue of being unusual or out of the norm, and how the brunt of that fear is directed towards those whose differences from the majority are most evident. Benny's lack of intelligence and David's surplus both make them potential targets of scorn, so they seek refuge in maligning others who can be more universally defined as outcasts. In "The Sign," an adult David, who has long since left Darwin, reflects on his ambivalent relationship with his cousin in a way that demonstrates extraordinary compassion, both on the part of David and the writer who created him.

No story brings the perils of being queer in Darwin to the fore quite as boldly and viscerally as "Two Lesbians Walk Into a Bar," the title of which rightly resonates as the start to a joke that is decidedly unfunny. In this story, a local musician named Danny is questioned by a police officer concerning the previous evening at the town's bar, Jack's Place. This story highlights the rampant homophobia that is often a part of rural life, but the author is careful not to polarize characters or oversimplify the issue; indeed, the intrigue in this difficult story lies in an examination of the competition between family, friendship, and principle, and in Darwin, the family always wins. In exposing the limited world of Darwin and the pressures and fears faced by its residents, Collins also considers how people form their perceptions of right and wrong based on their environments. Many of the characters are trapped by circumstance and economic conditions, and only some exhibit awareness of this state of being; even fewer long for something entirely different, because to do so is to invite scorn from the community.

While this collection is ultimately strong, there are some weak points. "Private Thoughts," with its punning title, depicts the thoughts of the aforementioned Benny, now a soldier. This story adds little dimension to the other, stronger stories with which it is connected, and renders obvious some of the conclusions that would have been best left to the reader to draw. This detracts from the subtlety so deftly created in the other stories. Collins clearly wishes to be democratic in his character representation, allowing each one a chance to tell a story from his/her point of view,

but in some cases this leads to a rather heavy-handed sense of irony and a slightly clichéd notion of life's unpredictability.

Despite an occasional weak story, an advantage to the multiple voices that Collins creates in this collection is that he avoids repeating a tiresome formula in which the reader is forced to see a rural community only through the eyes of an educated character who subsequently faces marginalization for his or her difference. Collins depicts anti-intellectualism and other polarizations endemic to rural life — especially horrific in “The Darkness and Darcy Knight” — without limiting his perspective to that of the educated. Other characters of varying intelligence, education levels, and aptitude are portrayed sympathetically, indicating a commitment to a fair exploration of rural life in Newfoundland by an author who knows his subject well.

In all, Collins's fictional town of Darwin is one the reader will want to visit for its sheer abundance of character study and its realistic depiction of rural life. Darwin's residents have a lot invested in how they are perceived in the community, and Collins's stories provide us with a privileged look beyond the veneer to a seedier side of the happy outport. This is a welcome addition to any collection of writing about Newfoundland, and a book that should be of interest to anyone who enjoys Canadian or rural literature.

Gina Granter  
Memorial University and Dawson College, Montreal

Ursula A. Kelly and Elizabeth Yeoman, eds., *Despite This Loss: Essays on Culture, Memory, and Identity in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: ISER Books, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-894725-09-5.

THIS COLLECTION OF essays is based on a workshop held in 2006, which brought together a diverse group of people to think and talk about how the ‘experience of loss and unresolved grief’ have marked and shaped ‘us,’ i.e., Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, especially in the context of culture and of an examination of what Newfoundland and Labrador means as ‘home’ both for those who are here, and for those who have left.

The diversity between both the approach and the background of the participants leads to an inevitable unevenness in this book, with contributions including a wide range from recondite and theoretical musings to grounded community activism, and from photo-based analysis to edited interviews. This challenges the reader not only to understand the contributions for themselves but also to relate them to each other and to the overall theme. All the contributions are focused tightly on the Newfoundland and Labrador experience, which is both a strength and a weakness.