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REVIEW ESSAYS

Snapshots and Other Forms of Dailiness in Three Newfoundland Memoirs

NANCY PEDRI

Malone, Greg. *You Better Watch Out: A Memoir*. Toronto: Knopf, 2009. ISBN 978-0-307-39674-7.
Murphy, Shirley. *Allan Square*. St. John's: Flanker, 2009. ISBN 978-1-897317-37-2.
Pratt, Christopher. *Ordinary Things: A Different Kind of Voyage*. St. John's: Breakwater, 2009. ISBN 978-1-55081-264-0.

WITH *YOU BETTER WATCH OUT*, Greg Malone, one of Newfoundland's and Canada's top comedians, sets out to put into context the stories of "little disasters, small betrayals, secret dramas and the fierce storms that rage in the undefended heart of the young" (xii). This humorous coming-of-age story is, as Malone puts it, his attempt to "understand what really happened and what it meant, to create an emotional history in chronological order, or as close as [he] can come to it" (xiii). The emotional history to which he alludes is his own experience growing up Catholic in downtown St. John's during the 1950s. The everyday happenings of a young Greg Malone —

trips to the dentist, Boy Scout adventures, schoolboy rivalries, family Sunday drives, best friends and early crushes — become momentous events that hold sway in the life of a young boy and are narrated with an eye eager to understand their impact on Malone's personal development.

A similar concern with recording, organizing and rendering meaningful the ordinary events of everyday life underlines another famous Newfoundlander's memoir, that of painter and poet Christopher Pratt. As the title so aptly suggests, *Ordinary Things: A Different Kind of Voyage* is a collection of Pratt's meditations and disjoined ramblings on the "immense presence in ordinariness" ("Prologue" n.p.) that he has taken note of throughout his life. In the opening pages, the author prepares readers for what is to follow: a celebration of the "non-exotic, the anti-picturesque," of the day-to-day happenings that he deems worthy of attention not because they are extraordinary, but rather simply because they exist ("Prologue" n.p.). Neatly divided chronologically by precise dates, starting with September 1953 and ending with September 2007, Pratt's memoir includes letters home; excerpts from notebooks and diaries and prose poems detailing his activity, development and concerns as a painter; his fishing and boating trips; memorable places and the weather as well as reflections on such philosophical questions as the nature of the universe and of existence. These personal documents trace a voyage that spans the greater part of Christopher Pratt's lifetime. *Ordinary Things* portrays a sober journey that moves steadily towards an emotional want, a want to, once again, "be in love with light, and wind, and water lapping on the shore, the sense of wilderness, the sense of home" ("Epilogue" n.p.).

The daily, the ordinary and the emotional also occupy a central role in Shirley Murphy's *Allan Square*. It is around the stories of school happenings, summer adventures, Christmas wishes, first amorous thoughts and other common occurrences of childhood and adolescence that Murphy frames the "defining event of [her] life," the death of her father in 1944 when she was seven years old (227). In *Allan Square*, the author chronicles her childhood struggles with poverty, hunger and fear growing up in Allan Square, St. John's, repeatedly demarcating time and the impact of the tragedy on her life with a curt "after Dad's death" as opposed to "before Dad's death" (13). Each short, untitled chapter stops on one specific memory of "misery and woe" (174) from Murphy's childhood — her stepfather's drinking, school uniforms, her mother's failing health, home health remedies and so forth — presenting it in a clear, matter-of-fact fashion. Free from embellishment or adornment, *Allan Square* is a stark tale of a woman revisiting her first eighteen years to lay claim to her childhood self, a self that was often confused and frightened, always ridden with Catholic guilt and lacking in self-esteem.

The centrality of the everyday in these three memoirs is most evident in the reproduction of family snapshots in each of them. The popularity of photography within families and the emotional pull snapshots have on family members has been theorized by Catherine Liu. She writes:

> For each of us — no matter how materially deprived, at least in the industrialized nations — a certain number of family photographs has accrued to our very persons, securing shelter for a certain identity that is continuous with memories that only others might have of our past. Each of us carries these archives with us, like so many little containers of the past, whether we display them or not. (531)

Not only do snapshots secure our place within the continuum of family memories, but they also corroborate our individual stories of self. Almost always authored by amateur photographers and destined for private family consumption, snapshots usually hold value only for those who have an emotional link to that which is pictured.

All three authors reproduce a fair number of snapshots in their memoir, many of which come from their own private collection. Malone includes a tiny snapshot, most often portraying family members and friends, at the beginning of each of the 40 chapters, including the "Author's Note" and the "Epilogue." Although the snapshot is left uncaptioned, the author does include an "Illustrations" section at the end of *You Better Watch Out* where he provides indications about its subject (i.e., the people and places pictured) and when each photograph was taken. Tellingly, no mention is made as to who authored the photograph. Throughout the memoir, the chapter titles together with their introductory sentences provide readers with a strong hint as to what is imaged in the accompanying photograph. Although readers can gather enough information at the beginning of each chapter to make some general assumptions about the photographic image, it is only by consulting the "Illustrations" section that dates and names are disclosed or interpretative statements — such as "Happily set up in our backyard" (364) — given. Each photograph thus gains in meaning and significance within the overall narrative of the memoir in relation to the verbal statements provided in the "Illustrations" section. This section, which concludes *You Better Watch Out*, not only guides the reader's interpretation of the photographs, but also secures their role as documentary visual evidence for what is being narrated.[1]

Murphy, too, provides lengthy narrative captions alongside the twenty-one photographs she reproduces in the middle of her memoir. For example, she captions a photograph of a gazebo:

> The bandstand in one of my happiest childhood places, beautiful Bannerman Park. During the war years, marching bands and parades were a regular part of life in St. John's. The music was stirring, the atmosphere vibrant and the soul effortlessly filled to overflowing with thoughts of victory, power and hope. Thanks to the Bannerman Park bandstand, men in uniform can still bring me to a swoon. (113)

Her detailed captions complement and expand upon both what is shown in the photograph as well as what is narrated within *Allan Square*. Their narrative function

highlights the importance of the photographic snapshots for the narrator and firmly secures the images' place within her life story. Information identifying what is pictured is complemented by the narrator's expanded reading of each photograph so that, for her, the photographs trigger a story seeped in personal memory. Accurate in their representation of place and people, family snapshots call forth personal histories, but only for those who are familiar with the details of what is pictured in them. They can thus weave or even manipulate the visual document into the complex narrative of self.

Since its inception, photography has held a particular appeal for writers of autobiography.[2] The appeal of photography to those who write about their own self may reside in the fact that the photograph is readily viewed as "literally an emanation of the referent" (Barthes 80). When faced with a photograph, especially an analog photograph, readers tend to believe that it is able to *show* them, in a definite way, the *real* world. Megan Rowley Williams writes, "A paradoxical and almost compulsive desire to narrate the single meaning behind the photograph defines our modern negotiation of the relationship between word and image" (5). Despite decades of theorizing the photograph's constructed nature and despite knowing that images are often ambiguous and easily manipulated, readers — even the most savvy of readers — continue to fall prey to the "myth of photographic truth" (Sturken and Cartwright 17). Readers want, in other words, photographs, especially the many snapshots collected in family albums, to be authentic records of the real.

The persistent desire to see in the photograph a sound, truthful record of actual things, events and people that happened in actual time, in an actual place mirrors the desire to approach autobiography as a literal "reproduction of the author" (Meehan 2). In a very practical way, both autobiography and photography make their living by laying claim to a transparent, authentic, truthful representation of self. Like photography, autobiography too continues to be defined as a referential art (Eakin 3). Canadian literary theorist Lorraine York sums up this argument in semiotic terms: The "seemingly unmediated relationship between signifier and signified" which is often described as the major photographic code is "also the major autobiographical code" (647-648).

Because of their shared strong referential pull, both photography and autobiography also fulfill a commemorative function. Like photography, autobiography too "seduces us with both its high standard of accuracy and its promise of memorializing the dead" (Liu 524). As faithful representations of the real, photography and autobiography are particularly apt to archiving a life. Indeed, when reproduced in the genres of life writing, photographs often function as they would in a family album: they present lives lived in a particular fashion, subject to their own destinies and intersecting in unpredictable ways with the lives of others. When weaved into a story, the photograph is freed from what André Bazin has described as photography's process of temporal embalming, a process that presents "lives halted at a set moment in their duration" (14). Read as an essential part of the verbal narrative, the

photographic repertoire reproduced in any given autobiography documents not so much a static life, but one that has developed and unfolded in a complex web of events or in what Malone calls "the roiling river of [one's] reality" (xiii).

In *Ordinary Things*, Pratt too reproduces snapshots that *show* readers the people, places and buildings that were or continue to be dear to him. Although the forty-eight snapshots reproduced throughout the memoir are either briefly captioned or not captioned at all, readers look to them to find a visual trace of the particulars informing Pratt's life. With the privilege of being presented with the author's private collection of family photographs comes a curiosity and a desire to see in the photographs something that resembles what the author sees in them as well as the need to relate the photographs to the events presented in the memoir.

A photograph captioned "Mary West and Christopher Pratt at Sackville, 1955" shows the author and Mary laughing together in the snow (17). The letter home to his mother that fills the page on which the snapshot is reproduced mentions Mary, but only states that she and Pratt "always study the exhibitions in the Art Gallery and take notes on them" (17). That their relationship extends beyond a shared interest in art is strongly suggested by the photograph reproduced at the bottom of the page. The next time readers *see* Mary is in a photograph captioned "With Mary West Pratt, Salmonier River, 1981" (33). Although she is casually mentioned some pages before then in narrative entries that span 1963 to 1968 (25, 32), her important status as Pratt's wife is confirmed only by the caption that accompanies the photograph. The pairing of this snapshot, which shows a degree of intimacy between Mary and Christopher, with a somewhat disengaged verbal rendering of their relationship pushes readers to narrate around what is imaged and what they have discovered in the written text.

These and other incongruities between the verbal and the visual, where the photographic images provide important supplementary information to the written text (at least insofar as a personal life is concerned), raise serious questions as to what in the memoir remains unsaid, undisclosed and, thus, at best, allusive. As the memoir's subtitle asserts, Pratt sets out to present readers with a different kind of voyage. After drawing forth many parallels between his artistic aims and goals and his personal experience of the real, Pratt admits that although they are closely linked, "reality is one thing, but making art of it is another: a different kind of voyage" (81). It is the voyage to making art from experience that he wishes to explore and reveal in writing his memoir. What that voyage is, exactly, how it can be expressed in writing or how it looks in reality is expressed only as a void at the end of *Ordinary Things*. In his "Epologue," Pratt reveals that, at seventy-one, he no longer feels "that artless, unselfconscious enthusiasm" that allowed him to work "indifferent to [his] own precedents and without concern for expectations people may have about [his] work." He admits that he wants "[j]ust to be in love with light, and wind, and water lapping on the shore, the sense of wilderness, the sense of home" (n.p.). At the bottom of this page, he reproduces a photograph of a young couple sitting on

a bench. It is captioned, "My mother and father at Bay Roberts, c. 1934." Their son, narrator Christopher Pratt, was born in 1935. Could this family snapshot suggest, then, that Pratt's memoir is to be read as having no definite ending? Is this incongruous pairing of the verbal and visual arguing that Pratt "will not," as he puts it, fall into the danger of "thinking of [his career] as a 'wrap'" (140)?

Part of the difficulty in reaching a firm conclusion as to how the photographs and written text work together to create meaning lies in the ambiguous relationship to the real shared by both photography and autobiography. The reality presented in autobiographical writing, just like the reality portrayed in a family snapshot, lays claim to a particular sort of authenticity. The stories told and showed are personal and unique; they are presented as singular and singularly important. However, as Walter Benjamin and others have convincingly argued, the photographic snapshot (which is the preferred photographic genre of autobiography writers) structures the order of historical knowledge. These casual photographs, usually taken by amateurs who wish to document a given moment in time, are more interesting for their relationship to other photographs than for their aesthetic qualities. Although the snapshot "is supposed to serve an illustrative, indexical, and empirical function" (Liu 525), it perhaps focuses far too much on the "typical" to succeed.

Memoirs and their accompanying photographs tell a story — at once real and fabricated — that could very easily belong to many different people living at the same time in the same place. Similar snapshots of residential homes and school buildings can be found in the three memoirs by Malone, Murphy and Pratt, as can a photograph of their parents and of their own self as a young child. Other similar, popular snapshots include family portraits (usually outdoors) and group portraits of friends as well as those that show children in classrooms or huddled close together. Certainly, snapshots of Pratt's paintings cannot easily be transferred to Murphy's *Allan Square* reality. Nor can snapshots of Murphy in her school uniform slip seamlessly into Malone's memoir. However, there is a haunting similarity, an underlying visual theme that can easily be detected in family snapshots, especially those that are important enough to collect in family albums. Taken alone without any text, these snapshots tell little about an individual person or family; instead, they document the history of family. The photographic snapshots reproduced in these memoirs do not provide historical evidence for what family looked like in St. John's during and after the 1940s; rather, they represent what family *should* have looked like.

The snapshot's singular importance, its function as a personal record of a unique family or person, is secured not by what is pictured, but by the stories that surround it. Only in relation to the written text can each photograph come close to fulfilling its promise to archive a life. The context in which it is viewed, the stories that direct its meaning and the assumptions informing its truth value ensure that the snapshot holds sway as a visual document of the personal. In these and

other memoirs, family snapshots become charged with the personal, the singular and the unique.

Notes

[1]Besides photographs, Malone includes maps of the city of St. John's and the Churchill Square neighbourhood at the beginning of *You Better Watch Out*. The city map included as the frontispiece indicates not only the shops, hospitals, churches and schools found in the St. John's core, but also the private residences that factored into the young Malone's life. This visual document speaks to the way in which person and place overlap throughout the memoir. Indeed, person and place are so intricately intertwined in *You Better Watch Out* that they seem to change and develop in unison. The growing boy's confusion and exhaustion, discouragement and joys, desires and secrets weave in and out of the story against the backdrop of an ever-changing St. John's cityscape.

[2]Timothy Dow Adams has commented that "the history of referentiality in photography has run almost a parallel course to autobiography's" (xvi).

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