

Chad Pelley. *Away from Everywhere*

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and ignorant about Newfoundland music and literature. For Hugh, the request stings. And yet it is Hugh who tells her of Cleary, a Newfoundland writer she has never heard of. And it is Mathews who creates his own art in this city, by making St. John's geography central to his novel. The landmarks and street names continually root the novel in this space, drawn as a vibrant cosmopolitan centre where colonial history meets new cultural production. Beneath the acerbic one-liners and the cartoonish minor characters, then, the novel engages with the deeper topics of place, family, and literature. It prompts us to consider not where a person is from in determining who they are, but how he relates to the important people in his life, and how he makes a place his home.

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Chad Pelley. *Away from Everywhere*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2009. ISBN: 1-55081-265-3

CHAD PELLEY'S FIRST NOVEL, *Away from Everywhere*, is about the broken spirits and relationships of the Collins family. When twins Owen and Alex are still in school, their father becomes schizophrenic and is institutionalized; a few years later, their mother is killed by an abuser at a woman's clinic. The teenagers now pursue divergent paths: Owen as a writer, Alex as a doctor; one troubled and aimless, the other focused and successful. Now in their thirties, Owen destroys his connection with Alex by having an affair with his sister-in-law Hannah. The novel opens with a car crash in which Hannah dies and thus the affair is exposed: the time frame revisits the past, presents the weeks after the crash and relates the affair through Hannah's journal.

The novel is designed as a serious work, as a study of a family and particularly of a son in distress. Pelley quotes Tolstoy's famous opening statement in *Anna Karenina* about unhappy families to underscore his aims. The central difficulty for such a novel is to present human dynamics in a believable manner, a hard task. Pelley is most successful in his depiction of Owen, primarily because his actions are at the centre of the novel. He has interests and desires and much guilt. Yet his feelings do not often extend beyond the bounds of lust and lament: variety comes in the changing objects for both. Even if the emotional limitations of the character might be argued as the deadening affects of mental illness and alcoholism, some sense of a complete Owen is needed to contrast the decline.

The other characters exist, as is to be expected, as reflections of Owen. There are often fitting touches of observed behaviour in these depictions. Yet, they lack a completeness that makes them exist beyond their connection to Owen. The father is a sequence of bizarre and growing violent acts, then a human doll in the Waterford: a reminder to Owen of paternal love and a warning for the future. Twin Alex is

simply Owen's foil, despite the possibilities, deeply evident in literary tradition, for greater psychological exploration of both characters. Alex simply shows love for and anger towards Owen, as the plot requires, but has no independent consciousness. The women, in outline or essence, conform to female stereotypes of mothers or whores, except that Pelley often combines the two. Owen's mother is all mother, despite an overheard conversation she has with a neighbour that expresses her sexual frustration, virtuously controlled, now that her husband is in hospital. Aunt Lillian is a caregiver to the whole family. Owen's first girlfriend, five years older, is Abbie, "twenty-two with the demeanor and wisdom of a caring, fifty-year-old mother." She breaks off their relationship because she wants a child. When Owen meets her years later, she's a nurse, still taking care of him and still sexy, too: she runs her hands down her uniform, stripper-like, emphasizing her "trophy" body. She is, also, seven months pregnant. Hannah, the central female, is a thirty-four year old mother of two girls, but her body is twenty-year-old tight. She teases Owen into the temptation of her flesh: stripping naked to change from swimming while his back is turned; bending to sway her braless breasts before him. Her characterization is even further diluted by that hoary device of journal entry, making her an observer of herself. Her entries are pages of complaint, first about her husband, then, when her initial girlish heat chills, about herself (she calls herself whore and slut) and Owen.

Plot is commendably central (life is doing), but the attempt to create drama from the lives of characters special only because of their damage leads to some structural weaknesses. For one, coincidence rather than motivation sometimes connects events: the injured Owen is treated by his ex-girlfriend nurse, Owen befriends one man in his outport retreat, the one made cuckold by his father, Alex spies a rehab confession of Owen's in the garbage with his name on it. (One improbable plot conceit is that Owen would read his dead lover's journal "as a novel" and that it would take over a month to finish). Another indulgence is a proliferation of violence, often described at length: the car crash, the father's threats, the mother's braining, Owen's taunting of louts and subsequent thrashing, the pelting of snowballs, Hannah's rape at age seven by her brother, the ingestion of household cleaner. In one example, Owen is assaulted by his brother at Hannah's grave, Alex booting his twin's face against and across the gravestone, pressing his shoe against Owen's face, then stamping on his brother's chest. Aunt Lillian and Alex's little daughters watch. The overall result is not a dark world, empty of hope or justice, just a mundane one where bad things happen. Nor is there psychological purpose behind the nastiness, even if Owen inflicts some hurt on himself: the car crashes because of road conditions, well-adjusted Alex unleashes brutality, the rape is incidental colour. The effect is the sensation of pulp fiction, of periodic outbreaks of detailed violence and idealized sex, their regularity emptying them of emotional effect.

The language, too, consistently displays intelligence but often becomes too fussy, even if that fussiness may be an attempt to reflect Owen's ambitions to be a

writer (and that aim is not explicit). Deliberate metaphorical or imagistic flourishes habitually describe the everyday; the modes clash, like a tuxedo at bowling. Often stiffness results, as in the relation of Lillian's return from Hannah's funeral:

She burst right into one of her philosophical rants, but all he wanted was the details of the service: Who wept and who stood stoic? Had the circumstances of her death polluted the atmosphere? Trimmed down the attendance? His head was full of uncouth questions he couldn't bring himself to ask. They'd have to sit there like burning embers.

Dialogue, too, which has even more demands of verisimilitude than exposition, often reads archly, like a 1950s teleplay, unbalanced by attempts at colloquialism like the misspelled "fucken."

Despite the seeming negativity of this review, Pelley's book overall is a good effort. It improves as it progresses. The last forty pages, in particular, are strong, most successfully conveying the muddled darkness of Owen's world. The best quality of the whole novel is the detail brought to the individual scenes, not necessarily with breathing persuasiveness, but which attempts an observed fullness. *Away from Everywhere* does not fulfill its high aims, perhaps by trying too hard to do so, but that intent can be feelingly understood. There is here intelligence, craft, and promise. The next book will test that promise.

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Andy Jones, *The Queen of Paradise's Garden*. Illus. Darka Erdelji. St. John's: Running the Goat Books and Broadsides, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-9737578-3-5.

THE QUEEN OF PARADISE'S GARDEN, adapted by Andy Jones and illustrated by Darka Erdelji, is a delightful retelling of a folktale collected in Newfoundland. It is a beautiful picture book and an intriguing expression of both the specific and universal nature of the folktale. The verbal and visual texts work together in ways that are signatures of good picture books: they complement and counterpoint each other, conveying and expanding the themes of the story. *The Queen of Paradise's Garden* is a book with much to offer readers of many ages and satisfies cultural, aesthetic, and audience demands.

For the written text, Jones has adapted two similar versions of the story found in *Folktales of Newfoundland* (No. 29 and No. 30, both titled "Queen of Paradise Garden"), adding elements that give the story continuity and logic somewhat missing in the collected oral versions. In the book, the wife of an old, childless couple miraculously gives birth to three sons. The youngest is unusual, as folktale third children often are, in that he is born two days after his brothers. When the three