

They Let Down Baskets. By Berni Stapleton. Introduction by Chris Brookes. Photographs by Jamie Lewis. With audio CD “What happened was_” written, recorded and produced by Chris Brookes, 1993, length: 47:50 stereo, # 981102XJ02-50784L36 MFG by Cinram. (St. John’s, NF: Killick Press, 1998. Pp vii-viii + 64, 33 black and white photos, \$24.95, ISBN 1-85387-91-4, pbk.)

Lara Maynard

Volume 22, Number 2, 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087909ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087909ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Maynard, L. (2000). Review of [*They Let Down Baskets. By Berni Stapleton. Introduction by Chris Brookes. Photographs by Jamie Lewis. With audio CD “What happened was_” written, recorded and produced by Chris Brookes, 1993, length: 47:50 stereo, # 981102XJ02-50784L36 MFG by Cinram. (St. John’s, NF: Killick Press, 1998. Pp vii-viii + 64, 33 black and white photos, \$24.95, ISBN 1-85387-91-4, pbk.)*]. *Ethnologies*, 22(2), 303–306.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087909ar>

They Let Down Baskets. By Berni Stapleton. Introduction by Chris Brookes. Photographs by Jamie Lewis. With audio CD "What happened was_" written, recorded and produced by Chris Brookes, 1993, length: 47:50 stereo, # 981102XJ02-50784L36 MFG by Cinram. (St. John's, NF: Killick Press, 1998. Pp vii-viii + 64, 33 black and white photos, \$24.95, ISBN 1-85387-91-4, pbk.)

There is a helpless inevitability in documenting disaster. If it could raise the dead or bring the codfish back then it would be colourful magic indeed. Instead it is black-and-white-and-grey art like chiselling gravestones, work that must be done so that a moment of history should not be forgotten or easily repeated, and that its survivors should not be ignored, trampled or short-changed by a world eager to move on to the next day's headlines (vii).

So writes audio documentarist Chris Brookes, who collaborated with photographer Jamie Lewis and actress/playwright Berni Stapleton on her first book writing attempt, to produce a poignant package chronicling what Brookes refers to as the "apocalypse" of the moratorium on cod fishing in Newfoundland which was announced by the federal government on July 2, 1992 (vii).

They Let Down Baskets is based on the diary that Stapleton kept while touring throughout Newfoundland and Labrador in 1994 with fellow Newfoundland actress Amy House performing "A Tidy Package," a play that focused on women's place in the moratorium. While in St. Anthony on October 27, 1994 she wrote: "Women are lost in the maze of the moratorium. We gathered up their stories and concerns and knit them into a play, gave them a chance to be heard over the roar of the ocean" (31). *They Let Down Baskets* continues to reflect the moratorium's repercussions for women. But in the same diary entry Stapleton asks what is perhaps the weightiest question of the book: "No fish, no love. Can we love ourselves now?" — "ourselves" apparently referring to Newfoundlanders in general (31).

They Let Down Baskets won the 1999 Provincial Book Award, which is administered by the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador (WANL), in the non-fiction category. The judges had the following to say about the book:

Stapleton's writing is both engaging and lively, and her subject matter timely and significant. Her memories are strongly realized; she is observant of details and draws the reader into her experience. Perhaps because of her theatre experience, Stapleton has a wonderful ear for speech. Her work is finely and sensitively written (Dooley 29).

They Let Down Baskets is indeed a strong creative writing product in a stream of consciousness sort of style, interspersing Stapleton's memories of her Marystown childhood permeated by fish and other personal memories in sometimes poetic prose with musings, overheard conversations, poetry, a counting out rhyme and excerpts from "A Tidy Package." The combination of these creates a feeling that is almost mystical and this may be simultaneously the book's strongest and weakest point. Its literary merit is very strong, but the success of the artistry also imbues the book with a surreal quality that hints of fiction, as the style in which the experiences and emotions, however moving, are conveyed sometimes creates a feeling that is almost surreal or as fantastical as the stinky green-haired mermaids which Stapleton imagined as a child and refers to throughout the book.

Given the style of the writing, *They Let Down Baskets* raises an issue of readership accessibility with which folklorists surely must also be concerned. This work is every bit as autobiographical as it is a chronicle of the impact of the moratorium on Newfoundlander's lives, but is the very creative literary style accessible to the people whose lives are most directly affected and whose stories the book documents? Perhaps my assumption that fishers and fish plant workers as a general group aren't accustomed to reading such forms of literature makes me guilty of stereotyping. Nevertheless, I believe that this is a fair question and closely akin to one that has plagued me as a student of folklore reading and producing academic writing, especially when I read scholarly works so thick with jargon and theory that they make me think that the author has likely made the human subjects incomprehensible to themselves.

Jamie Lewis' black and white photos are fittingly somber, although there are smiling faces scattered among them. The images weren't necessarily selected to illustrate Stapleton's text, but rather to tell their own stories. The result is somewhat like reading a book at a photography exhibit on the same subject — one can distract from the other, since both are engaging. Several of Lewis' photos use a ghosting technique, with fishers appearing to fade either into or out of the background, prompting the viewer to ask, "Which is it?" Are these figures and their occupations fading into history, becoming, as the female narrator of one of Stapleton's poems suggests, "what they'll teach in some class" (11)? Or do the images suggest something too resilient to be lost, too resilient not to leave an impression, not to haunt? Do they imply hope?

The most effective element in this poignant collaborative package is Chris Brookes' audio documentary "What happened was_," which was produced

one year after the moratorium announcement. This appears to be an extension of "On the Package," which was broadcast on CBC radio both in Newfoundland and nationally, as well as in Britain and the United States, and for which Brookes won a Gabriel Award from Unda-USA in 1994. It may be a folklorist's leanings towards interviews and literally hearing people's voices that biases me towards this haunting documentary which is narrated by Brookes and features two fishermen, a fisherman's wife, a traditional singer (who both sings and makes commentary), a fisheries scientist and sound bites from news programs. Brookes has said that he "just wanted to make the most beautiful poem in the world which would bring the fish back" (Welbourn). Perhaps falling just short of that, Brookes has produced a deeply moving documentary so raw with truth and emotion that when it first aired on local CBC radio in 1993 the station got a call from someone who suggested that it be taken off the air before it stirred up trouble by rousing fishermen.

Among the documentary's most effective techniques is the juxtaposition of Newfoundland folksongs about fishing sung by Anita Best, including "Petty Harbour Bait Skiff," "The Banks of Newfoundland" and "Feller from Fortune" (also known as "Lots of Fish in Bonavist' Harbour"), with the fishers' tales of loss. At one point Best comments, "The rhythm of the fishery is in ourselves as Newfoundlanders. It's in our psyche, our psychology. It's in our mental image of who we are." This is the loss to which "What happened was_" bears witness.

A missionary who spent thirteen years in Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland in the nineteenth century reported that people there often used the proverb "We must live in hopes, supposing we die in despair" (Sider 158). The most heartrending aspect of the documentary, Stapleton's book and Lewis' ghosted photographs is the desperate hope that seeps in despite the great extent of loss. At one point in the documentary, Sam Lee, an inshore fisherman from Petty Harbour, expresses hope for the return of the cod, even after taking a trip on a vessel where scientists recorded discouraging data on cod stocks:

I don't want to give up on it. Not yet. It's a big thing, you know, just to give up on it. When there is hope, there's always hope—not much of it, but my mindframe right now is telling me that the fish is not caught. It's gone, it's moved somewhere, right. And in time it'll come back to us. It's just you can't even imagine now never having a cod again.

Likewise, Stapleton's text is peppered with references to hope:

In Newfoundland we all know how to put a good face on bad times. It is very important for your dignity and your hope. One of the most heartrending things about the moratorium is that there seems to be an unwritten law that people be denied their good face. The rest of the world wants to see us pitiful (19).

The struggle between hope and despair unites the collaborative efforts of Stapleton, Brookes and Lewis into a package that ultimately does justice to its subject, the Newfoundland cod moratorium, and to the people whose lives it so altered.

References

- Dooley, Danette. Provincial book award-winners. *Newfoundland Herald*, 54.18 (May1, 1999): 29-31.
- Sider, Gerald. *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Welbourn, Kathryn. *They Let Down Baskets*. *Pilot*, 39.2 (January 31, 1999): 4.

Lara Maynard
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Devine's Folk Lore of Newfoundland in Old Words, Phrases and Expressions, Their Origin and Meaning. Compiled by P. K. [Patrick Kevin] Devine. (St. John's, Newfoundland: Robinson & Co., Ltd., Printers, 1937. Reprinted St. John's, Newfoundland: Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, 1997. Pp.iii-v + 81. Preface by Philip Hiscock. \$8.95, ISBN: 0-88901-317-9, pbk.)

Devine's Folk Lore of Newfoundland is a piece of Newfoundlandia neatly frozen in time. Its original 1937 publication was financially supported by Gerald S. Doyle (1892-1956), a prominent Newfoundland businessman and Devine's cousin who, as is pointed out in Philip Hiscock's Preface to the book, knew the commercial value of Newfoundland folklore, since he distributed five free collections of Newfoundland poetry and songs as a means of promoting his own business. Doyle placed advertisements for his drugstore variety products