

Gaffer. A Novel of Newfoundland. Kevin Major.

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Gaffer. A Novel of Newfoundland. Kevin Major. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Ltd. 202 pp., maps, \$24.95, hardcover, 1997, ISBN 0-385-5667-1.

ED BALSOM

GAFFER. A NOVEL OF NEWFOUNDLAND is a book that can be alternately pleasing and irritating, satisfying and disappointing. It is a departure from the conventional realism of Major's last novel, *No Man's Land*, one that combines grating technical features and an intelligent narrative framework.

In a survey of Newfoundland's past, present and future, Major emphasizes the difficulty of determining who is really responsible for the deplorable state of the province's economic and political affairs. He also emphasizes the need for Newfoundlanders to change certain negative attitudes so that Newfoundland can be reclaimed from tyrannical capitalists who could control it entirely in the near future. The central characters realize it has been a treasure trove of resources that has been ravished since Cabot's arrival. Although Major is cautious about the issue of culpability, he does argue that Newfoundland has been manipulated and exploited by foreign investors who are in collusion with federal and local politicians. Culpable also, as Major sees it, are Newfoundlanders whose general ignorance of the outside world has made them the overly tolerant and passive victims of oppressive relationships.

The setup for the novel is simple and holds possibilities: Gaffer (the word means a boy eager for hard work) is an adolescent Newfoundland malcontent on the threshold of manhood. At the beginning of the novel he is transformed into an amphibian and travels forward and backward through time, using the sea as a temporal thoroughfare. Since each section of the novel is given an annual date as a title, we always know which era of Newfoundland's history we are visiting. Also, the black and white photographs which accompany the dates, although they do not

evoke the different eras, maintain a consistently austere mood to support the narrator's tone.

The opening section is entitled "1997" and eases us into the realm of the preternatural, the allegorical and the archetypal. Once we accept Gaffer's transformation into a "Boyfish" and the possibility of time travel, Major is free to take us through a series of events that ranges from Cabot's arrival in 1497 to the reification of Newfoundland's culture as a tourist commodity in 2041, the year in which Newfoundland's Churchill Falls contract with Quebec will expire. One positive feature of this work is Major's ability to keep controversial political and social issues in the air at all times and to allow none of them to settle as finished debates, even at the end of the novel.

Gaffer's aquatic explorations are actually a quest for answers to personal and political disasters, such as the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy and the Churchill Falls deal. What impels him is "tenacity infused by the hammer of injustice," a locution that Major tactfully plants intermittently throughout the novel. But when Gaffer incriminates certain people for sell-out deals, their culpability wavers and dissolves, and blame is shunted off to some nebulous "them" or "they." Take the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy for instance. Gaffer works his way to the conclusion that "there were no answers, only fury at greed outweighing the lives of brave young men." This explains his decision not to attack the bosses on the rig; he knew "it was not them who called the tune."

Then there are the foreign dragger men who trap Gaffer in their nets. After vituperatively accusing them and the ships' owners of cleaning up the fishing grounds, he hears one of the men say "'We are not the ones!'" He fares no better at the great sealing disaster, where the sealers' servitude to the captains is explained by Gaffer's grandfather, one of the sealers. Gaffer tells his grandfather, "It is yourselves who must rise up ... Why let them make a drudge of you?" His grandfather's reply is poignant: "Who of our Island would dare defy the Cap'n? And have our families want for food? I fought to get this sealing berth." Gaffer then thinks solemnly that "To make something of it all would take a labour he could not bear," a thought, along with his grand-father's response, that forces the reader to think more critically about the question of culpability.

Gudrin, a transhistorical figure who arrived with the Vikings, commiserates with him. She tells him that without even recourse to blame there is only "'Rage chiselled into this rock of a place'" and "'eventually another smack of the hammer, you can be sure of that. Drive yourself insane if you think on it.'" And that is one of Major's points, that there is not much we can do about the past. His other point is that there is much we can do about the future.

Major envisions a Newfoundland controlled totally by commercial interests that commodify its culture. In one scene Gaffer returns home in 2027 from an ocean sojourn to find his community circumscribed by electric fences and guarded by his nemesis, Skidder, and his toadies. And here things can become irritating for readers.

The only building to which Gaffer has access is a fishing shed his uncle bequeathed him before going to the mainland in search of work. Bursting into the shed, he confronts a man registering fishing gear as artifacts on a computer. In a scene rendered too much by techniques of juvenile fiction, the man exclaims

"This is a heritage site. I am classifying the artifacts, bucko."

Gaffer snarled at his talk and made for the cod jiggers and twine needles on the table.

"Stand clear!" the fellow yelled, brandishing the hook.

"I'll not have you contaminate the artifacts."

"And I'll not have you make a fool of this place."

"Snap out of it, you ingrate. We're in a new millenium.

This is a new economy."

The new economy and cultural degeneration really get out of hand by 2041.

When Gaffer arrives home at this time, he finds that his own outport home is a part of a theme park or commercialized living museum, "Newfoundisney. Newfland North. Call it what you will." It is visited by unscrupulous tourists, again irritatingly stereotypical, who are irremediably steeped in video culture. Their addiction to Hollywood-glitz dominates their perception of reality, so that every movement is a show that has to be flooded with light and captured on film. The irony is that Gaffer and Gudrin are mistaken for actors in a historical drama produced for tourists. Their escape from the park, another scene better suited to adolescent fiction, is recorded as a live-action stunt by Skidder and his impromptu film crew. In a melodramatic exit, Gaffer and Gudrin jump from their hide-away cave high up in a cliff face safely to the waters below.

Through most of these scenes Major persuasively recommends that Newfoundlanders control their wrath and develop more patience if they are to avert the perils of a neon future. He suggests, also, through the character of Buckley, a sage old goat, that Newfoundlanders become less cynical. And in an encounter between the pirate, Mainwaring, and the Beothuks in 1614, Major suggests that Newfoundlanders become less fanatical about territorial ownership. Mainwaring's oarsman says the Red Ochre Indians "Have it in their heads they own this island." Gaffer replies "They would share it." Earlier in the novel, Gaffer himself is xenophobic and refers to Gudrin's ancestors, in an exclusive way, as her "kind." Major raises the question of distinctive cultures and territorial ownership when he has Gudrin reply, '*Your kind* [Major's emphasis] is it now! So you are the sole heirs, the rightful ones. The ones that belong to this place. Don't talk such shit!'

While the collision of ideas and debunking of myths make this book worth reading, superficial characters such as Skidder, the adolescent quality of many scenes and the quasi-Joycean syntax do not. As for characters, Skidder, the archivist, and others cannot bear their ideological weight because Major too often treats them as stock figures engaged in comic book action scenes. At one point, for example, Skidder and his gang are on ATVs in pursuit of Gaffer. We are told that Skidder's "rig spit a thunderous crackle, its front tire reared into midair. It bolted

ahead of the pack. Gaffer lunged forward, lone bedraggled wolf hunted for extinction.” There is not enough acute characterization here to attract sceptical readers. Major is in a hurry, for some reason, and treats his characters and scenes hyperbolically. Frequently he holds paragraphs to four lines or less and does not allow a scene to get beyond a page or two. Consequently, there are, on occasion, too many narrative bridges and not enough substance to the things bridged.

As for the language, Major attempts to give an impression of both the tumultuousness of Newfoundland’s history and the unsettled nature of Gaffer’s mind through frequent use of fragmented syntax. Sometimes this works, but often the device is used perfunctorily, as when Gudrin informs Gaffer about the new owner of the Cove: “Some slime of a front man. Hired Skidder and his clowns to guard the place. Nothing gets touched. Including me. Thwarted Skidder’s bloody scheme.” To compensate for these annoyances, there are a number of provocative scenes that make *Gaffer* great political satire, including scenes involving the *Titanic* and Brigitte Bardot.

Fundamentally, Major is caught between two genres in this novel, working a hybrid form that cannot quite extend to two audiences at once. Yet it is interesting to watch him work his way through his own metamorphosis as a writer, one who likes to swim in the crosscurrents and offer perspectives on Newfoundland that tell a tale more truthful than many stale bona fide histories.