

The Fogo's War Trilogy. Patric Ryan.

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GARY L. SAUNDERS

AROUND 1942, WHEN I WAS SEVEN, my intrepid father took Mother and me by canoe from Gander Bay to Fogo to visit her parents. The five-hour trip gave me ample time to stare at everything. Suddenly, I saw what looked like a slim stovepipe slicing through the water on a course parallel to ours. Dad had seen it too. "Submarine periscope," he shouted over the hum of the outboard, "one of ours, I hope." He held our course for Change Islands Main Tickle. The periscope sank from view. I've often wondered what that submariner thought of our frail river craft so far out to sea.

I think it was that childhood experience, plus the magic of Fogo, which kept me reading Patric Ryan's often exasperating novel to the end. It's full of submarine talk.

But first, my exasperations. At 350,000 words, the book is too long for what it has to say. A good editor would have trimmed it by a fifth. But this book seems to have been self-published — the kiss of death for objectivity. At any rate, the text is peppered with clichés ("ruled supreme," "hope and pray"), wrong tenses ("the wind sung," "sunk" for "sank"), redundancies ("Shhh," he cautioned"), purple prose (ff) and clumsy phrasing: "Good art...didn't make value judgments about culture but made culturalists make value judgments about themselves." (307)

More annoying were the homonyms that swarm on nearly every page like flies around rotten fish: “plain” for “plane,” “hoards” for “hordes,” “born” for “borne,” “fair” for “fare,” “peddling” for “pedalling,” “boarder” for “border,” “breadth” for “breath” and “breath” for “breathe”, and so on and on. (I poured over these with mounting peek. Here, taught I, is proof that a hole generation of elementary students was cheated of good reading and writing skills!)

Seriously, I blame Whole Language, that pernicious reading instruction program which swept our elementary schools in the early 1980s. I’ll bet Ryan Publishing got some bright student to transcribe the text from audio tapes, trusting the computer spell-checker to catch any spelling errors (which it mostly did). Unfortunately, no computer can think.

I also got tired of Ryan’s attempts to reproduce outport dialect. While outport speech is pleasant to the ear, on paper it grows tedious, like reading “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” in the original Scots. As with salt, a pinch of written dialogue goes a long way. Worse, Ryan tries to improve it. Sometimes he adds an “s” to an innocent verb, creating absurdities like “I don’t wants” (513) or “I gots to look out....” (453) He even tacked a final “s” on St. Anthony. And he is too fond of ending spoken sentences with a hapless “like” preceded by a comma. This is a holdover from sixties hippytalk and out of place in early outport speech. Likewise, his use of “ary” and “nary” was inappropriate. These are American dialect words. The Newfoundland dialect uses “ar” (either) and “nar” (neither). He had problems (377) with “the once,” which of course means “as soon as possible.” And he wasn’t above inventing words — “binnacy” for example. Shakespeare invented words too — but he was Shakespeare.

Finally, at times I caught a whiff of condescension. Ryan plainly admires outport people. Yet, like CFA writers from Norman Duncan to Annie Proulx, he can’t resist a subtle putdown disguised as praise. In his 1945 scene where the Germans set up a radio in the parish church and invite Fogoites to listen, (559) he describes the villagers as “transfixed, faces upturned toward the magic box... A religious experience.”

Shades of “The Movies Come to Gull Point!” Come on, Patric! Even backward Gander Bay had radios long before that. Joey Smallwood’s 1941 *Handbook Gazetteer and Almanac of Newfoundland* lists 39 radios for Fogo and nine for Gander Bay. And they didn’t need German technology to run them.

I know...artistic licence. Writers of historical fiction tread that slippery ridge between truth and fiction. So I didn’t quibble when the author planted the Gaff Topsails somewhere back of Bonavista Bay, (209) nor when he gave Twillingate Hospital an “old and nearly blind doctor” (481) instead of the brilliant contemporary surgeon John McKee Olds. As one *Trilogy* character observes, “Writers don’t see everything... Only what they want to see. And what they need they make up...” Still, artistic licence is no licence to talk down.

Fogo's War Trilogy is a simple story told in a roundabout way. There are three chapterless books, namely "Summer Wars & Winter Schooners," "Schooners Are Black & U-boats are Grey" and "The Final Act in Fogo's War." The protagonists, Newfoundland schooner captain/destroyer helmsman Pius Humby and German blueblood/submariner Kurt von Schulte are sucked into the two world wars. Twice they confront each other in naval combat, once in May 1916 in the English Channel and again in the fall of 1944 in the Strait of Belle Isle. They survive to become friends.

The novel unfolds in a convoluted series of flashbacks introduced by dated excerpts from ships' log entries, personal journals and von Schulte's unpublished novel (improbably translated by Pius' traumatized nephew Jimmy). With Fogo as its gyroscopic centre, the action swivels around Wilhelmshaven, Norderney, Berlin, the North Sea, Leipzig, London, Halifax, the Strait of Belle Isle, Hamburg, Québec City. Now and then the author tugs us back to real time, circa 1981, the year Ryan spent in Fogo. Thus, his is yet another voice in the novel.

The effect is like sitting through a four-hour movie fragmented by multiple scene changes, numerous voice-overs by different narrators and two popcorn intermissions. Cinematically this might work, but in a long book the motion becomes jerky and slow, like a journey by horse-cart over a rutted woods road. Maybe if I'd read it at one go this wouldn't have been a problem. Perhaps the author had a movie in mind?

Ryan calls his book a tale of love, not war. "The real war," he explains, "is within, and has nothing to do with great battles and battlefields." Well, yes and no. Although Pius and Kurt both struggle with personal griefs — Pius with bankruptcy and the memory of a lost son, Kurt with his suicidal past, his warlike father, his troubled relationships — Ryan is at his best in describing war.

His submarine lore is impressive. There are scenes as gripping as anything in the movie *Das Boot*. Commander von Schulte is a wily warrior, but one with no stomach for Nazi ideals. In fact, one of the strong points of the novel is its even-handed portrayal of hunter and hunted.

Equally telling are his descriptions of wartime Europe. The episode of the Hamburg boy pimping for his widowed mother is superb. So is the mythic love scene with sexual tigress Anna on Norderney beach, and Kurt's doomed affair with the Jewess, Lady Bright. Between the wars we languish with Kurt in a Berlin mental institute, where he puts in time pasting newsprint collages of German and Allied propaganda on every wall.

Kurt's forcible recall in 1944 to command a WWI U-boat is skilfully handled. So is the episode where he trains a crew of green youngsters under the watchful eye of arch-Nazi Karl Kassell.

It's when Ryan turns to domestic life that he falters. He knows outport culture, he knows how to work the damper when baking bread in a wood stove, he's aware of the sexual stereotypes in pre-Confederation Newfoundland. Yet somehow it all

comes off as precious and banal. Too bad he killed off his only interesting female characters — Anna, Lady Bright and Rosie — so early. Their disappearances seem too pat, as if he didn't know what else to do with them. This is especially true of Rosie and her nemesis, double agent Gröning. Compared to them, Pius' wife Mary and the stereotypical Uncle Saul are cardboard cutouts. Overall, his best realized characters are Kurt and Jimmy.

However, give Ryan a boat and he's happy. In this he resembles Eric, the U-boat engineer, the book's most genuinely likeable character. The passage about building a small schooner in winter reads like love-making.

As the novelist tightens the net of dénouement around his characters, his many scene changes and flashbacks begin to seem worthwhile. The scene where Pius and his crew literally jig Kurt's sub, crew and all, is richly comic. So is his handling of the Canadian military's bungled invasion of Pius' peaceable kingdom. Although I found Kassel's subsequent single-handed seige hardly credible, the Humby's integration of most of his crew into outport life was cleverly done. Here is a parable about the essential altruism of human beings when cooperating for survival and dignity as opposed to war and domination.

Was it Sam Clemens who said, "This is a book which, once put down, is very hard to pick up?" That was my first reaction to Ryan's *Trilogy*. Then something seductive, something boyish and charming, changed my mind. Which goes to show, grammar and syntax ain't everything.