

Rachel Kimor-Paine. *Death Under Glass.*

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEWS

Rachel Kimor-Paine. *Death Under Glass*. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006, ISBN 189429499-8

IT TOOK A SHIFTING of gears to go from the detective novel I had just finished reading, Robert B. Parker's *Bad Business*, with its tough, wise-cracking Boston private eye Spenser, to Rachel Kimor-Paine's *Death Under Glass*, introducing the Hungarian-born, retired lawyer, amateur St. John's sleuth Olga Erdős. But it was a shift well worth making.

Among the many sub-genres of the detective novel, *Death Under Glass* allies itself most closely to the Agatha Christie model, with Erdős an immigrant version of the eavesdropping busybody Miss Marple [whose biography has been so cleverly and lovingly pieced together by fellow St. John's resident and author Anne Hart, *The Life and Times of Miss Jane Maple* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985)] and with St. John's a stand-in for the English village of St. Mary Mead. Not that St. John's is a village, but its commercial, professional, and academic upper crust does share characteristics with a small town in which everyone knows everybody else and everybody else's business. Her successful husband (a member of the Order of Canada absent on business for the duration of the novel) and her friendship with Lily, wife of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary Chief of Police Richard Hamilton, provide Olga with her entrée into this privileged circle.

Rachel Kimor-Paine shared with her protagonist a Hungarian birth, marriage to a man prominent in St. John's society, and training as a lawyer. Presumably Kimor-Paine also shared with the fictional Olga Erdős her experience of frequently being mistaken for a Yugoslavian, maybe, or a Bulgarian. She showed her affection for her adopted country by titling each chapter with a line or phrase from either *The Ode to Newfoundland* or *Oh, Canada*, throwing in a "God Bless the Hungarians with Good Cheer" for good measure.

I have learned from a memorial to her in the newsletter of the Women's Association of Memorial University of Newfoundland that the author also shared with certain of her *dramatis personae* a love of flowers and gardening. Indeed horticul-

tural fervour figures alongside real estate intrigue, extra-marital affairs, and academic rivalry in the enticing intricacies of the book's plot.

Two of the least likeable suspects happen to be women academics, competing with one another for a prestigious research professorship. Byzantine historian Irene Winters, who is not only ferociously ambitious and obnoxiously sharp-tongued but also fashion-blind, reminds one of a tendency among certain male British novelists, Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* maybe, to depict the rare Oxbridge female academic as a frump. And Irene's competitor Jane Stewart, described as a fiercely self-assertive dyke "of a conniving female personality, entwined with the boldness of a man" (53), participates in another stereotype, that of a professor of Women's Studies. But that the characters, especially the unsavoury ones, are broadly drawn is more than compensated for by the strong writing and the fast pace of the narrative.

Indispensable to Olga Erdős's detecting abilities is her friendship with the Chief of Police. While Miss Marple often had to contend with uncooperative, disdainful representatives of law enforcement, Olga benefits from Richard Hamilton's sharing of information to such a generous degree it strains credulity. In the final scene, set in the Pippy Park Golf Course Club House (although not so named in the novel), the Chief of Police, in an even more unbelievable move, steps aside and turns over the entire final exposition and explication of the crime to his Hungarian friend.

But what an absolute tour-de-force of an all-of-the-suspects-gathered-in-one-room wrap-up it is — the evidence adroitly presented, the suspense drawn out and sustained over many pages, as each suspect's possible culpability is presented to be carefully weighed and considered and then rejected until the true culprit is revealed. This reader was kept in the dark to the very end. (I had more or less figured out *Bad Business* halfway through.) To mystery novel buffs, I can definitely recommend *Death Under Glass* as a most satisfying read.

My only regret concerns the author's decision to change the names of some well-known sites, such as Waterford Bridge Road to Waterfall Bridge Road, the Duck Street Bistro to Water Duck, Duckworth Street to Main, Rennie's River (presumably) to Ruby River, Boxey on the South Coast to Foxey. Meanwhile actual names of other places and annual events were retained, such as Government House, the Government House Garden Party, Open Garden Day, Conception Bay. Clive James, in a recent *New Yorker* review of detective fiction from around the globe, remarks that another sub-genre of the *roman policier* has emerged over the years — the crime novel in which setting is as important as detective. Examples include Ian Rankin's Edinburgh, Donna Leon's Venice, Sjöwall and Wahlöö's Stockholm. "Ideally," James writes, "an author should turn out a sequence of detective novels that will generate a bus tour in the city where they are set" ["Blood on the Borders," *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2007, 93]. But that would be difficult if the city's sights/sites have been renamed. In any case, now, alas, because of the tragically

early death of Rachel Kimor-Paine, a sequel to *Death Under Glass* will never be written. But I have it on the best authority that we can look forward to a second Kimor-Paine mystery novel, accepted for posthumous publication, but set outside Newfoundland.

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Michael Winter. *This All Happened*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001, ISBN 0-88784-651-3; *The Big Why*. Toronto: Anansi, 2004, ISBN 0-88784-188-0

AN INTERESTING THING happened to Michael Winter on his way to *The Big Why*: he wrote another novel (“A Fictional Memoir,” to be precise), and called it *This All Happened*. Not that this is unusual for Winter: in an earlier collection of short stories, *One Last Good Look*, Winter’s protagonist is writing the diary that would become *This All Happened*. It is in that text the same protagonist attempts to write a novelization of American artist Rockwell Kent’s tumultuous stay in Brigus, Newfoundland. *The Big Why* is that novel. Though the first novel is planted firmly in the modern and developing genre of contemporary St. John’s novels (see Bowdring’s *The Night Season*, Moore’s *Alligator*, or Harvey’s *Inside*), while the other is the latest Newfoundland historical novel (*à la* Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *The Custodian of Paradise*, Crummey’s *River Thieves*, and Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*) both possess a remarkable quality: they both make compulsively readable the presentation of two rather unlikeable characters.

Now I understand in terming Gabriel English “rather unlikeable” I run the risk of offending the author, for it is well known (and this is where the “fictional memoir” part comes in) that the Gabriel of *This All Happened* is the literary alter-ego of Michael Winter (having apparently swapped the name of one archangel for another). It is also well known that most of the characters in this novel are renderings of actual people who actually populate actual St. John’s. It seems inevitable that in every conversation I have about this book, someone will point out who Lydia “really is,” or that she is “pretty sure” her neighbour is the “real” Wilf Jardine. I will leave such musings to those more familiar with the downtown St. John’s of *The Ship* and *Duke of Duckworth* where most of the action of this novel occurs.

Perhaps “unlikeable” is too strong a word for Gabriel, but he can certainly be annoying at times. Gabe spends most of the novel contemplating the slow death of his relationship with Lydia Murphy. The rest of the novel he spends contemplating everything else. Gabe is a *flâneur* — an urban idler who moves from bar to art show to house party without the cares of the nine-to-five. Gabe is “writing a novel,” though he actually spends very little time at the task. As a substitute for actual work,