

Michael Crummey. *The Wreckage.*

Valerie Legge

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eye as an eager and frivolous boy. His diary entries and those of Wallace show a terrible fixation on food which seems somehow to reduce their humanity. Her own accounts were of a journey that was not without incident but which did not provide the hair-raising elements of danger which probably contributed to the continued printings of Wallace's book even after her own slipped out of the public eye. Mina Hubbard's account languished in obscurity, out of print from 1908 till 1981, and by the admission of her descendants and the observations of Anne Hart we see that even her own family knew little about this benchmark achievement.

Much of scholarly and general interest has now been published on these expeditions, but someone coming to the tale for the first time could not do better than read *Great Heart*, which combines scholarly rigour with great readability. The book remains non-judgmental about the rivalry between the parties and the weaknesses of character evident in both. Instead, it assigns a proper place to George Elson, least understood and most important to the success of the expeditions. Davidson and Ruge have given Mina her due as an explorer rather than a female eccentric, and have shown Wallace in a sympathetic light, a man who could not imagine how Mina Hubbard could object to his book.

Great Heart has contributed substantially to the revival of a travel narrative that would be newsworthy even now, a century later. The humour of the conversation, real or imagined, is somewhat forced and the focus on George's contemplations about why writing is important do not fit as smoothly as the other pieces, but these are small nubs in the skillful weaving. The epilogue, in particular, provides a fascinating account of their own journey in research. These travel accounts have everything: death, romance, bitter rivalry, fame, and grief. Davidson and Ruge's account is an essential first step in following the rigorous journeys of Labrador explorers.

Martha MacDonald
Memorial University

Michael Crummey. *The Wreckage*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2006, ISBN 0-385-66061-8

"There isn't another country in the world could have dropped those bombs and then carried on claiming love is the cure for all that ails the world."

SPOKEN BY ALOYSIOUS FUREY many years after returning home from World War II, these words gesture back to the novel's epigraph by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, generating questions about identity (who we "think" we are), our assumptions about other cultures, and our infinite capacity for love and hate.

In *The Wreckage*, Michael Crummey examines issues relating to personal and national identity through intersecting moments in the lives of several charac-

ters: Noburo Nishino, born in Japan but raised in British Columbia; Aloysious Furey, an orphaned Newfoundlander, destined to meet Nishino in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp; and Mercedes Parsons, whose romantic encounter with Aloysious (“Wish”) in a remote Newfoundland community, compelled Wish to enlist in the war.

In the opening scene, strangely reminiscent of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, where stories are told to give the soldiers strength to endure the gruelling brutality of the Bataan Death March, Lieutenant Kurakeke and his company of battle-weary soldiers, including Nishino, are in retreat following a bloody assault on American forces. In his nightmarish description of men “miserable with dengue and with dysentery,” of men floundering in mud and marching without rations, Crummey captures the horrors of war. Then, in a brief interval between marching and sleeping, Kurakake asks Nishino, who has been wounded, for a story. With Kurakake’s symbolic offering of a packet of fish, the past is unlocked and we are taken back to where it all began: to Nishino’s lonely life as an “racial” outsider in British Columbia; to Wish’s wayward existence in Newfoundland, where for a period of time he trailed in the celluloid wake of the hard-drinking Hiram Keeping; and to the fiercely independent and singular-minded Mercedes Parsons. As Kurakake reminds Nishino, at the heart of every story, “There is always a woman.”

The Wreckage begins with a statement from Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, an odd work whose title conveys one particular set of paradoxes associated with America’s perception of Japanese culture: the seeming contradiction between its deep appreciation of beauty and its commitment to ritualized violence. Crummey shows how that contradiction has its counterpart in the inexplicable mysteries of love and hate, two opposing emotions embodied in two of its central characters: Mercedes Parsons, whose love for Wish endures despite years of separation, and Wish Furey, whose conflicting names convey the rage which ultimately threatens to extinguish that which he most desires.

This novel of war, with its terrible legacies, explores two particular forces that set people, cultures, and countries, apart: religion and race. For centuries, religious animosity was a dominant feature of Newfoundland culture; in 1883 during an Orangemen’s Day Parade, religious hostilities led to the deaths of five men when Protestants and Catholics clashed on Harvey Street in Harbour Grace. As in the Parsons’ kitchen, many Protestant homes displayed anti-Catholic images such as *King William III Crossing the Boyne* or some other historical scene celebrating the victory of Protestantism over Catholicism. Marriages between Catholics and Protestants, when they occurred, were scarcely occasions for communal celebration. According to family lore, in the spring of 1932 when my maternal grandmother, a Catholic from a nearby community, married my grandfather, a loyal and high-ranking member of the Orange Lodge, the Society flew its flag half-mast to signify the death of one of its members. The brotherhood had been broken.

Wish's Newfoundland experiences of religious hatred and intolerance are akin to Nishino's experiences of racial discrimination in western Canada. Their common experiences should have fostered a sense of kinship between them: both men were orphaned at a young age; both knew physical hardships and deprivation; both knew what it meant to be viewed as outsiders. Yet their experiences taught them to respond to the world with cruelty rather than compassion. Nishino's sadistic treatment of Wish and his fellow prisoners is an act of retaliation for the ill-treatment he had received in Canada. Hatred breeds hatred.

With the American bombing of Japan, the war ends and Wish, scarred by his wartime experiences, begins decades of drifting aimlessly from eastern Canada to the American midwest, arriving eventually at the Chicago Amour and Company Stockyards, made infamous by Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, an exposé of the meat-packing industry and America's mythologies about immigration and democracy. Working in the evenings at a small movie theatre near Chicago's Canaryville, Wish meets Magnolia Cooksey, a black woman from the Mississippi Delta; "something in her soft-vowelled drawl ... reminded him of the way people spoke home in Newfoundland." As his affinity with Magnolia grows and as racial hatreds ravage America, Wish begins to realize the depths of his own darkness and to examine his past in light of what he has experienced during his wanderings. One of the most dramatic moments in the novel comes when he is finally able to confess to the monstrous act that he and his fellow soldiers had committed during the final days of the war. Only then can he allow the women in his life, the steadfast Mercedes and enigmatic Lilly, "to take away his heart of stone."

In addition to race and religion, differences between men and women form another divide in the novel: women like Mercedes and Lilly are "gamblers," extravagant and daring and indifferent to a world demanding conformity, while men like Wish and Nishino are guarded, more "wary of the unexpected intimacy." Like Lavinia Andrews in Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage*, Mercedes and Lilly are not afraid to change the shape or the content of the stories that they have inherited, to imagine alternative scripts, or to fashion new ceremonies.

Though Crummey acknowledges a number of specific books which "helped shape people, places and events" in *The Wreckage*, there are strong resonances of other Canadian works, in particular Timothy Findley's *The Wars* and Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. For example, Wish's birth story about a horse deliberately set ablaze recalls Findley's antithetical story about Robert Ross, whose capacity for love and compassion compels him to risk his own life in order to rescue a barn of burning horses; and the fishing disaster in the opening section of *The Wreckage* recalls the dramatic and elegiac moment in MacLeod's "The Boat" when an estranged son describes how his father's shattered body was salvaged from the sea following a late November storm. At times, the sensuous language of *The Wreckage* (Mercedes's skin "as dark as cinnamon") conjures the foreign and erotic landscapes of a Michael Ondaatje novel or poem ("The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife").

One of the greatest pleasures of reading this novel comes from the richness of its language. The allusions to films like Alfred Hitchcock's *39 Steps* (with its web of intrigue and confused identities) and the nostalgic *How Green Was My Valley* indicate the accessibility and growing popularity of newly emerging technologies which, like the other visual arts, helped document significant historical events like wars and natural disasters. Crummey captures too the rich Newfoundland dialects associated with outport and city life. But it is the seemingly ordinary but startlingly original similes and metaphors that give the novel its deep, poetic resonance: Mercedes "as brazen as a cat"; "the ocean as smooth as a tablecloth"; Mercedes's eyes "as green as sea glass"; "the thought of her like a kettle kept warm at the back of the stove"; Clive's description of Mercedes "as hard as a box of nails"; Mercedes's "belly a wasp's nest"; Wish's "guilt, like the pale underside of a leaf flying up in a wind."

Like any good novelist, Crummey knows the importance of showing rather than telling. One such instance occurs early in the novel when Crummey intimates the complexity of custom and character by describing a mesmerizing scene between the young Mercedes Parsons and Clive Reid, the rough but reliable fisherman who eventually helps her escape from Gooseberry Cove. On "a soft September evening," the two had "crossed paths near the Spell Rock. He'd been drinking, but only enough to feel giddy with it. He'd bowed to Mercedes and called her Missus, danced her in the grass, singing a few lines of 'The Tennessee Waltz'." The sexual tension between the two is broken when Clive, shaken by the illicit kiss which follows, walks away from Mercedes with great restraint, "his gait intent ... as if he was trying to disguise a wound."

The title of the novel refers to the aftermath of the many minor and major disasters and catastrophes that *The Wreckage* records: the collapse of Mr. Yawata's chair, the moment when Nishino "felt as if the fate of all things Japanese in the new world lay there with him"; the tidal wave that struck Lord's Cove, destroying Wish's home and the houses of most of the inhabitants; the "hard northeasterly" that capsized Parsons's fishing boat, claiming the lives of Mercedes's father and young Willard Slade; and the bombing of Nagasaki, creating "more devastation than it was possible to catalogue."

The Wreckage may rightly be called a healing narrative for, like Leslie Marmon Silko, Crummey knows that stories, when told carefully, can be a form of medicine. It is tempting to read *The Wreckage* in Homeric terms, with Wish as just another lost and lonely warrior trying to find his way back home and Mercedes as just another patient, outport Penelope. In his work with Vietnam war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, American psychiatrist Jonathan Shay uses the stories from Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to help his patients recognize and reconcile the traumatic events which occurred during *their* war.

Hindered by the old mythologies regarding male heroism and patriotic duty and lacking an adequate language to articulate what must have been simply inconceivable and inexpressible, many returning World War II veterans, like Wish, re-

mained silent about their war experiences, taking their untold stories with them to their graves. Crummey's novel allows us to imagine what may have caused the darkness that we occasionally glimpsed in the eyes of our veteran fathers. And how they may have passed that darkness and pain along to the women they returned home to and to the children that they raised. As Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his famous treatise *On War*, "war is never an isolated act."

Valerie Legge
Memorial University

Russell Wangersky. *The Hour of Bad Decisions*. Regina: Coteau Books, 2006, ISBN 1550503375

THE HOUR OF BAD DECISIONS, Russell Wangersky's first book, collects seventeen stories. Wangersky is a talented writer, and his book is strong enough to earn such soubriquets as "auspicious debut" and the like. There's a temptation to focus the review on collecting evidence to support that evaluation, and to leave things at that. This is St. John's, after all, where everyone in the literary community is unfailingly polite.

But good as the collection is — and it made the long shortlist for the 2006 Giller Prize — it could have been a lot better. And it's in the hope that Wangersky will set his bar somewhat higher next time that I offer the following observations.

A strong point of the book is its intensity. But it's an intensity created almost solely by the relentless recycling of the same basic set of circumstances. Again and again lonely characters experience the pain of bad relationships and their aftermath. The minority of stories that don't deal directly with this issue feature equally isolated and disoriented figures.

After 254 pages, one feels numbed. A back-cover blurb mentions that Wangersky has "compassion" for his characters. True enough, but it would have been nice if he'd saved some for his readers as well.

Lest I seem to be exaggerating, consider the following. In "In Between," Stephen lives by himself, "single now" after his marriage has fallen apart. In "Hot Tub," John takes extreme measures to avoid his angry wife. In "Dealing with Determinism," Kevin is unfaithful to Helen, who knows something is up. In "Bowling Night," Ray and Jenine fight like cats and dogs. In "The Latitude of Walls," Kevin has left his wife and witnesses the noisy incessant grief of an old widow. In "Mapping," John and Jodean have split up. In "Heartwood," Bev leaves John. In "I want ...," Ivan covets his ex-wife's new house. In "No Apologies for Weather," Leo fends off the irrationally violent Helen. In "Better Than This," Margaret cries for her less-than-satisfactory marriage. The one character who identifies himself as "hap-