

Russell Wangersky. *The Hour of Bad Decisions.*

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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
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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-

pily married” flees his family rather than give in to an inexplicable impulse to murder them, in “Perchance to Dream.”

Want some variety? Well, there’s Roy, the sociopathic arsonist of “Burning Foley’s,” Robert, the psycho cab driver of “On Call,” David, who slices off a finger to get attention in “Musical Chairs,” and a trio of oldsters — the stroke victim father in “Big Shoes,” the old lady whose son steals from her in “Borrowed Time,” and the old guy who just wants to run away from it all in “Housekeeping.”

Two or three of the stories have mutedly upbeat endings, depending on how generous one’s definition of “upbeat” is. The rest are downers.

No individual story is badly written, but the unfortunate cumulative effect is one of self-parody. The moral: either the book should have been half its length or (my preference) Wangersky should have experimented with different kinds of character, different themes, variations in tone, and so forth. As it is, one wants to say, “Lighten up, b’y!”

Of course it can be argued that Wangersky is probably exorcising personal demons, and if that results in fiction of limited artistic range, well, get over it. But (I’d suggest) it’s precisely the handling of that issue that separates the rookie pitcher from the old pro all-star in this game, in which, ultimately, the needs and desires of the reader trump those of the writer. In the real world of literature (assuming there is such a thing) nobody has to “get over it,” and the one-note Johnnies are quickly forgotten.

The same gap between rookie and seasoned veteran arises with respect to matters of form and technique. Here Wangersky is conservative, even cautious. The patronizing gesture of praise would be to call the stories “well-crafted.” In one sense, they are. Wangersky has mastered a certain classic twentieth-century way of writing a story and makes no serious attempt to depart from it, ever. There is a single-minded earnestness to his approach — no tricks, no surprises, no complexities; here’s the protagonist, here’s the conflict, here’s what it all means.

To pursue my baseball metaphor, he throws fastballs over the heart of the plate, time after time. But such pitchers don’t last long in the big leagues if they don’t develop a curve, a change-up, a degree of imaginative unpredictability in the way they do things.

It’s impossible in the space I have here to do a convincing job of demonstrating that this is a problem. The best I can do is draw attention to some of the more ostentatious concluding sentences as symptomatic of Wangersky’s general practice:

“Lost, and found, and hopelessly lost again, Kevin clamped both hands over his mouth, trying to keep the sound from flying out” (“The Latitude of Walls”).

“And for the first time, for the very first time, he realized how deep, how very deep, the cut had been” (“Mapping”).

“... he ran a finger slowly across her back in the dark, looking for a plumb line, the one straight line upon which everything else depends” (“Heartwood”).

“And after that, I knew I’d still be out there all by myself, looking everywhere for a small man wearing really big shoes” (“Big Shoes”).

In each case, the meaning of the protagonist’s experience is crystallized by means of a physical event interpreted definitively for us by the carefully deployed diction and imagery. The character may experience an old-fashioned epiphany (as in “Mapping”) or may be seeking one unsuccessfully (as in “Heartwood”) or may have authorial judgment blatantly brought down upon him (as in “The Latitude of Walls”) or may or may not get the point that the reader is expected to get (as in “Big Shoes” — does the narrator realize that he is, metaphorically, the “small man”?). But in each example, it’s all about the author spelling everything out for us.

There is, of course, nothing “wrong” with this sort of writing, but for me it involves a certain smugness, the sense that the writer is in some way saying, “See, I’ve done it just like Flannery O’Connor and Frank O’Connor and Katherine Anne Porter and the Joyce of *Dubliners* and all those other folks from fifty to a hundred years ago who get into the big *Norton Anthologies*.”

And maybe he has. But he could learn plenty from writers who haven’t been content with that — the likes of Richard Ford and Cormac McCarthy and David Foster Wallace and Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant and Leon Rooke and Douglas Glover and Norman Levine and any number of others.

Here’s hoping that he does, that the next Wangersky collection builds on the strengths evident here, and that the result is a more ambitious, varied, and artistically adventurous book than this one.

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Carl Leggo. *Come-By-Chance*. St. John’s, NL: Breakwater Books Ltd., 2006, ISBN 1-55081-082-0

WHO HAS VISITED NEWFOUNDLAND and not thought how poetic the Rock’s very place names are — Cupids and Brigus, Conception Bay, Bell Island. How appropriate, then, that Carl Leggo, a Newfoundlander by birth, but exiled for years in British Columbia, has entitled this poetry collection *Come-By-Chance*. His poems fairly vibrate with longing for his only true home, “the geography of [his] growing up” (11). Living and teaching at the other end of Canada, he has not lost his love of “Jigg’s dinner, dark rum, cod tongues, stewed moose, fish and brewis” (10) and “the sun almost tucked into the Humber Arm” (16). Nor has he lost the ability to tell a good yarn, a gift those born and bred in Newfoundland seem to have breathed in from their earliest years with every gulp of gusty air off the Atlantic. Leggo’s