

Bernice Morgan. *Cloud of Bone*.

Robin McGrath

Volume 23, Number 1, Spring 2008

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds23_1rv03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McGrath, R. (2008). Review of [Bernice Morgan. *Cloud of Bone*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 23(1), 90–95.

90 Reviews

Facts About Newfoundland. During the 1950s, he wrote numerous articles for such publications as the *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce* and the *Atlantic Guardian*. Starting in the late 1950s and continuing through the 1970s, he edited four community newspapers: the *Bell Island Reporter*, *Conception Bay Times*, *The Town Crier*, and *The Suburban Mirror*. Over the course of his 77 years he has tried his hand at an array of occupations to help pay the bills, so many that the term “Jack of all trades” springs to mind. After reading *Human Beans*, it is clear that this term’s negative follow-up phrase, “master of none,” does not apply. This self-professed eccentric is very much a master storyteller and this, his 13th book, proves it. I look forward to reading about his next eight years.

Gail Weir
Memorial University

Bernice Morgan. *Cloud of Bone*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, ISBN 978-0-676-97938-1

dead Indians are safer—
in poems, museums...

Mary Dalton, from “dead Indians” in *Allowing the Light*

THERE WAS A TIME when anyone could write about First Nations and other Aboriginal people, except perhaps Aboriginal writers who were hard-pressed to find publishers. Then the whole situation changed. *Akenashau* writers were running a grave risk if they dared to adopt the narrative voice of an Inuk hunter or a Cree grandmother. At writers’ conferences and literary gatherings, Lee Maracle or Basil Johnson or one of dozens of other competent, angry First Nations authors was likely to leap out of the audience and denounce the writer for “appropriation of voice.” Dead Indians, as Mary Dalton so succinctly put it, were indeed safer. Beothuk voices proliferated.

Times change and it is no longer safe to write even about Beothuks, not least because we are no longer sure they are all underground or locked into museums. The late Ralph Pastore speculated that the Beothuk may have been a branch of the Innu nation, no more different from the people of Natauashish and Sheshatshiu than those bands are from one another. Ingeborg Marshall is taking DNA samples from people in the Port aux Port area to see if they are truly of Mi’kmaq descent or if they perhaps carry some Beothuk genes. If it turns out that the *akenashau* did not exterminate the Beothuks, it may be a psychological load off their minds, but it will certainly force a new political reality upon us. Should Elizabeth Penashue turn out to be first-cousin to Shanawdithit, Newfoundlanders are going to have a hard time ignoring her vociferous protest against the Lower Churchill Development project.

Given the constant and complicated shift in the political landscape related to literature by and about Aboriginals, it was brave of Morgan to tackle this subject, particularly using a first-person voice. However, what separates the literary sheep from the goats is the courage to write the voices that need to be heard, regardless of what is fashionable or acceptable. The question is not whether Morgan should be writing about Beothuk, using a Beothuk voice, but how successfully she has done it.

Cloud of Bone actually presents three separate and distinct voices. First is a sixteen year old boy, a displaced outporter situated in a cramped row house on Boggan Street in St. John's on the eve of the Second World War. Kyle Holloway has been hanging around with a bad crowd and when his father dies and his mother decamps for home, he signs on with the navy and finds himself smack in the middle of the battle of the North Atlantic. Frightened, sick, and confused, he still holds onto enough of his humanity that when he sees a shipmate about to commit a war crime, he intervenes with fatal consequences.

Young Holloway goes AWOL and takes refuge in a cavern below and behind St. Mary's Church on the south side of the harbour. While down there, sleep-deprived and half-starved, he hears a voice from the underworld, the voice of Shanawdithit, the last of the Beothuks, whose headless corpse is buried nearby.

The second narrator is the corpse. Without relatives to bury her properly, Shanawdithit's soul cannot travel into the next world, so she passes her time remembering the decimation of her people and raging against the injustices done to her. This section is twice the length of the other two and it is the central, driving force behind the novel and the subsequent actions of its characters.

The third voice is that of a recently widowed forensic archeologist. Sent with her husband to investigate the genocide sites of Rawanda in the late 1990s, Judith Muir's tidy and satisfactory life comes crashing down when a sniper's bullet kills her husband. Back in England, she retreats to the same refuge she found when she was orphaned as a child during Kyle Holloway's war — the long-abandoned lock-keeper's cottage left to her by her elderly aunt, deep in the English countryside. Traumatized and bereaved, Muir sifts through the detritus of generations of her family and, unexpectedly, comes across the skull that had been so unceremoniously separated from its Beothuk owner's shoulders.

Although the voices remain separate, the three characters eventually come together for a brief moment towards the end of the book. The union seems inevitable, as it should, and the moment when these three frail, damaged humans touch is what Morgan is working towards throughout the narratives. For the survivors, genocide is not about the loss of a race, it is about the murder and loss of individuals on a massive scale. All three of these characters have lost parents, homes, identities, histories, and memory. They are amnesiacs trying to recapture what was lost through a painful remembering and piecing together of the past.

Regretfully, not all three voices are equally successful. Young Kyle Holloway is convincing. Kyle is your typical St. John's corner boy — easily led, ready to do anything on a dare, bored with school, and disinclined towards work. He is indulged, thoughtless, selfish, but in essence not such a bad type as his friend Gup. Kyle is a rowdy, not a skeet, just the kind of boy who is eventually likely to find what he wants in the discipline of the navy or the inshore fishery. You have the sense that given time and a bit of luck, Kyle will settle and sort himself out. You also have the feeling that luck is one thing that is in short supply in Kyle's life.

Judith Muir is also a believable type, although she is a little more complex. Muir is the kind of academic who knows about everyone else's ancestors but is uninterested in her own. She has wedded herself to her husband's career, so when she loses him she loses her work. Without children to pull her out of herself, she is finally forced to look inward and examine how she ended up so totally alone. Morgan is at her best here, slowly revealing the trauma of a wartime childhood. Too many authors rely upon the cliché of childhood sexual abuse to explain damage, when in reality there are a hundred other small losses that some children never quite recover from.

Sandwiched in between Kyle's voice and Judith's is that of Shanawdithit, a voice that does not quite work for this reader. The other two voices are alive, fraught with guilt, incomplete understanding, and contradictions. The voice of the dead Beothuk is none of these things. Yes, there are token gestures of guilt, admissions of error, but as readers we are already conditioned not to blame the victim. Any minor outbreak of greed or violence originating with the Beothuk is nothing compared to those of the European invaders.

Perhaps the character of Shanawdithit is less compelling than the other two because we know what happens to her. The Beothuk were doomed from the moment John Cabot landed and nothing they did would have changed that fate. Yet the voice of Shanawdithit is so unremittingly one-note that her saga begins to drag long before it is finished. The story is too encyclopedic, as if the author felt a moral obligation to include every death and atrocity that she had read about or guessed might have happened.

The historic accuracy of Morgan's depiction of the Beothuk comes into question early on. A scant five pages into Shanawdithit's long monologue, she describes her grandmother's voice as being husky from "the many pipes she had smoked in her long lifetime" (97). This small reference brought me to an abrupt halt. I am far from being an expert in Beothuk material culture, but I could not recall ever having seen a Beothuk pipe in any of my dozens of visits to the old Newfoundland Museum on Duckworth Street, or in my single trip to the British Museum where I skipped the Elgin marbles and headed straight to the Beothuk artifacts. I have often seen wild tobacco growing in the woods in Ontario, but never in Newfoundland. Where would an elderly Beothuk have obtained enough tobacco to develop a habit of smoking? Later, Morgan has Shanawdithit recalling how, as a child, she was taken to check

her family's traplines, and I found I was again going back over the text, wondering if I had missed some important clue.

It was not my intention when I began to read *Cloud of Bone* to check Morgan's research, but both these details, while small in the context of the novel, were so glaringly at odds with what little I know of Beothuk culture that I was driven to pull my copy of Ingeborg Marshall's *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* off the shelf. According to Marshall, there is no firm evidence that Beothuk ever smoked tobacco or any indigenous dried plant material (381-2). Furthermore, traplines were useful only to established fur traders, and the Beothuk rarely traded. According to Marshall, there is "no record of Beothuk deadfall or other traps," and "as far as the evidence goes, Beothuk usually fashioned English iron traps into tools of their own design and did not reset them" (332).

Sometimes, my unease with the ethnography of the Beothuk, as it is presented here, went deeper than whether they smoked pipes or not. For instance, Morgan appears to use the old Inuit story of the girl who married a dog as part of her depiction of Beothuk mythology. My initial reaction was to accept the borrowing — we do not know enough about real Beothuk mythology to expect anything legitimate, so why not appropriate from a nearby culture? However, as I read further into the story, my initial acceptance of this fiction diminished.

Most English language versions of this Inuit story from Labrador and elsewhere are fairly simple, like *Grimms' Tales* or *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*. In reality, of course, it is an extremely complex, highly charged myth that reflects Inuit cosmology and spiritual beliefs, a world view that is significantly different from those of the First Nations people. It is as if a writer were to borrow Hindu beliefs to explain Christianity, or use Jim Jones's speeches as a background for mass suicide in Israeli West Bank settlements. Given the particulars of the Labrador version (I am thinking of Birgitte Sonne's analysis in *The Acculturative Role of Sea Woman: Early Contact Relations between Inuit and Whites as Revealed in the Origin Myth of Sea Woman*, 1990), which stresses that the dog children are imperfect humans but relatives of the Inuit, and the historical association of the return of the dog children (i.e. invasion by the European settlers) with the massive deaths during the Spanish influenza epidemics, Morgan's use of the story seems particularly inappropriate.

Most readers probably would not know that the myth Morgan presents us with is Inuit. She makes no pretense, other than passing mention of Ingeborg Marshall's work, to knowing anything about Beothuk culture. Even her forensic anthropologist, Judith Muir, has only the faintest idea who the Beothuk were. As a reader, I want to believe that she has imaginatively put her finger on something about the culture and the character of Shanawdithit that is otherwise unavailable to me. Yet why would readers hold authors to a higher standard when they are making things up from whole cloth rather than remaking an old, familiar garment?

A successful novel requires both reader and author to agree upon certain ground rules, something we generally refer to as the suspension of disbelief, an agreement more obvious in science fiction than in main-stream novels. In science fiction, both reader and author know that men cannot live on Mars yet both agree to pretend it is possible. When, at the beginning of *Cloud of Bone*, Morgan has a sixteen year old boy choose not to eat for three days straight as a way of suggesting the trauma he has suffered, it is possible that out there, somewhere, is an otherwise healthy but starving boy who will walk past a ham sandwich or a piece of lassy bread to show his guilt and remorse at having killed a friend. I do not believe it for a minute, yet I accept it for the purposes of this narrative.

A more concrete example, perhaps, is Judith Muir's gas mask. As a four year old, Judith finds Shanawdithit's skull on a heap of rubble, throws away her gas mask and put the skull into the gas mask box tied to her school satchel. My rational mind knows that the average adult skull weighs a little over a kilogram, a considerable weight for a four year old to have bouncing off her hip unnoticed. Furthermore, the box for a child's gas mask from the World War II era is about three or four inches across, nowhere near large enough to hold a fully developed human skull. I certainly noticed the anomaly when I read the book, but it did not impede my enjoyment of the work in the least.

As a reader, I swallowed the gas-mask wielding camel willingly, yet strained at a pipe-smoking gnat. Perhaps this is where the double standard comes in. When I was growing up in St. John's, there were boxes of bandages, gas masks, ration books, etc. stashed in our attic. They were common household items, albeit discarded ones by the time I came along. There was nothing sacred about them. There is something sacred about the Beothuk. I want Morgan to get it right, and I am not sure she did.

In my notes on *Cloud of Bone*, the word "voice" appears again and again. Half the novel is in the first person voice of Shanawdithit, while the other half is divided almost equally between Kyle Holloway and Judith Muir. These other two sections are not first-person but they do mirror the consciousness of these two characters. Kyle's voice is pure St. John's — words like "gallavantin" and "smatchy" abound in the dialogue, and even the older, more educated voice of the narrator of that section is familiar.

Judith Muir's voice is familiar also — a little too familiar perhaps. As she spends most of her time alone, we get less pure speech, so it is hard to say how English she sounds, but the text carries the flavour of Boggan Street rather than Gillsford: "Very like her other life it is...."; "Well catered to these horses are...."; "Like small pocket knives they are...."; "Unusually dirty these planes were...."; "Cool it is and sunny...." Morgan's anthropologist seems to be channeling Yoda, or more likely Morgan herself. That St. John's syntax sounds peculiar in an English setting, but it probably passes with most readers.

And what of Shanawdithit's voice? There were times it was so like Tonto's it made me wince. When Shanawdithit's father declares that "from this day onward

we will kill any Dogmen who come near us,” Adibish answers, “that is called war” (196). When the Beothuk youth stumble upon a wooden shelter in the woods, it is described as “a kind of shack Dogmen hunters build in the forest — they are called tilts” (226). A European is described as carrying “a heavy blanket, a pot for cooking, smoking materials in a tin and containers that are named bottles” (227). A fairly lengthy discussion of land ownership, conducted in reverential, horrified tones ignores the fact that even most treaty Indians did not understand the concept (284-5). And why does a bottle need to be named but a tin does not? Both were equally foreign to Beothuk.

There is a lot to admire in *Cloud of Bone*. I enjoyed the first and third section so much I read them happily twice, although even that did not make the middle section more digestible. It also sent me back to *Topography of Love*, a book that I believe was sadly neglected both when it was released and since. There I found the same driving, confident voices I enjoyed in *Cloud of Bone*, the same obsession with hidey-holes, caves and tunnels, the same exploration of that venerable institution, The Mental, the same galloping, cumulative, enticing story-telling.

Cloud of Bone demonstrates that Bernice Morgan has not lost her powers of narrative, but perhaps she bit off more than she could chew when she attempted to convey an Aboriginal consciousness. I am in daily contact with First Nations elders and there are times I wonder if we were even born on the same planet. I saw nothing even vaguely unfamiliar in Morgan’s Shanawdithit. Certainly, the war vets and anthropologists of this world have had more than their fair share of the limelight, but it is not Morgan job to redress the historical imbalance.

They say that if you want to know about water, do not ask a fish. Morgan’s Shanawdithit is like a fish that is too aware of the water it is in, too aware of her own Aboriginal ethic. Perhaps a closer examination of why Shanawdithit’s sufferings spoke so strongly to an *akenashau* consciousness would have been more gripping than an attempt to dive straight into that alien mind. *Cloud of Bone* is not entirely successful as a novel, but it certainly raises some interesting questions for readers and writers alike. It will be interesting to see where Morgan goes from here.

Robin McGrath
Goose Bay

Agnes Walsh. *Going Around with Bachelors*. London: Brick Books, 2007, ISBN-13: 978-1-894078-56-6; ISBN-10: 1-894078-56-X

THIS IS A DELIGHTFUL book, a fitting sequel to Agnes Walsh’s splendid first collection of poems *In the Old Country of My Heart* (St. John’s: Killick Press, 1996). It took seven years before a CD was produced of Walsh reading a selection of her poems from that first book (interspersed with ballads beautifully sung by her daughter Simone Savard-Walsh and the pump organ music of George Morgan). This time