

Kate Story, *Blasted*

Jennifer Howell

Volume 24, Number 2, Fall 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24_2rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Howell, J. (2009). Review of [Kate Story, *Blasted*]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 24(2), 283–287.

national consciousness. Consequently, the book offers not only a case study of Peacock's research in Newfoundland, but also a perspective on the social networks shaping both Anglo-Canadian folksong research and the mid-20th century Canadian folksong revival.

The thoroughness of Kearney Guigné's study and its potential usefulness to her readers is amply demonstrated by her detailed documentation of sources which comprise ninety pages, almost one-third of her published work. In addition to an extensive listing of primary archival and secondary sources, Kearney Guigné provides notes which detail her interviews for this study, an audiography focused on Newfoundland folksong, a listing of Peacock's own publications, and an index which pays close attention to folk music scholars, the 1960s and 1970s North American folk music revival, her own interviewees, and the Newfoundland place names central to her research. Additionally, she includes a song and tune title index complete with Francis James Child and G. Malcolm Law's ballads, a feature often missing from lesser publications. Consequently, the bibliographic elements of this book offer a veritable reference library for those interested in Newfoundland folksong scholarship. Unfortunately, the thirty-five pages of notes, while providing useful commentary and documentation, are difficult to navigate because they lack page-specific headers.

Kearney Guigné's strength most certainly lies in her skills as a researcher. While the reading is occasionally tedious, one cannot help but marvel at her extensive interviews with Peacock and his associates, her familiarity with Peacock's audio and visual records, and even her detailed descriptions of some of his fieldwork sessions. While Kearney Guigné faults Peacock for having only a passing interest in the singers he recorded, she herself interviews many of them, providing responses to her own questions concerning the social history of the songs and singers Peacock recorded. Kearney Guigné diplomatically concludes that Peacock "served as a vital link for others to conduct additional research" (p. 159).

Because Kearney Guigné offers her readers a wealth of descriptive detail in an accessible writing style, this work will be of interest to folklorists, ethnomusicologists, social historians, Newfoundland studies scholars, cultural tourism policy-makers, and those generally interested in the politics of culture.

Doreen Klassen
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Memorial University

Kate Story, *Blasted*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Killick Press, 2008. 360 pp., CAN 21.95 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-897174-31-9.

STEEPED IN NEWFOUNDLAND mythology and lore, Kate Story's first novel, *Blasted*, transcends the category of regional literature. If the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* defines "blast" as "an infection, wound or physical injury attributed to the

malignant activity of fairies,” then the novel’s title refers not only to the curse suffered by the protagonist’s family, but to the protagonist herself. The reader shadows Story’s first-person narrator, Ruby Jones, through the trials and tribulations of everyday life, from her days as a discontented diner waitress, through her reckless motorcycle jaunts, casual sexual encounters, and alcoholic binges. Yet perhaps Ruby’s problems, albeit extreme, mirror our own. Her future seems doomed to continual excesses while her friends, members of Toronto’s art crowd, pursue their lives accumulating personal and professional achievements including marriage and gallery exhibitions. It soon becomes evident that Ruby cannot move forward herself unless she confronts the past.

Enter family trauma. Ruby’s Toronto existence is disrupted early in the novel by her grandmother’s passing. She must return to her native Newfoundland and its Southside Hills to console her grandfather and pay her respects. Yet despite her attempts to escape childhood, family, and self, she explains: “Part of me had kept my bags packed, so to speak, ever since I’d left, ready to go home. I still called it that: home” (2008, 53). The subsequent three-week hiatus reinitiates Ruby into the island’s mysteries. She indulges her childhood fascination with Shanawdithit, the last of Newfoundland’s indigenous Beothuk tribe, discovers family photographs, bonds with her estranged Great Aunt Queenie, renews childhood friendships, contemplates her parents’ fatal car accident, and, without fully comprehending, begins to unravel family secrets. Why was her father so different during the winter? Why did he often leave young Ruby and her mother? Who were the women in white dresses and red hats dancing in a circle by the Fairy Rock? Why do Queenie and Ruby’s grandfather insist on placing hardtack next to windows and doors?

With her questions still largely unanswered, Ruby returns to Toronto. And although this section of the novel proceeds slowly as the reader witnesses Ruby’s descent into madness and alcoholism, it transitions from social to magical realism (the term is used descriptively here). Of course Story does not create a sense of heightened reality in which supernatural elements appear natural à la Alejo Carpentier. Rather the overflow of Newfoundland folklore into Toronto realism functions metaphorically. It does not seem natural that Ruby is plagued by fairy-led pigeons or that she partakes in a fairy ritual in a city park. Yet the supernatural intrusion is symptomatic of Ruby’s condition: she cannot escape who she is, neither with fast motorcycles nor through binge drinking. The more she tries to escape, the more her past merges with her present, forcing her back to Newfoundland to unearth her family’s deepest secrets and, ultimately, herself.

The novel’s climax occurs when Ruby is forced underground by one of *them*, the malevolent fairies from whom her family has long strived to protect her. Contrary to her father’s experience, whom she later learns had been replaced by a changeling during the winter months, Ruby was able to push through the soil and free herself. This moment of self-redemption breaks the family curse — several members of Ruby’s family have been blasted including her great-grandmother

—and releases the protagonist's own personal demons. The remainder of the novel briefly chronicles Ruby's transformation: she decides to stay in Newfoundland, signs up for an accounting course, befriends her grandfather's dog, and finally convinces her grandfather that "[she's] through" (2008, 330).

The appeal of Story's novel is its underlying universality hidden beneath layers of regional folklore: who says you can never go home? Ruby's dilemma is that she has never been able to leave home, no matter how far she strays. This truth surfaces in several ways throughout *Blasted* such as Ruby's Newfoundland patois that her Toronto friends find so charming, the strange cast of characters following her around Toronto including the goggle-clad cyclist and the small women dressed in white, and the feeling that Ruby fled — not left — the Southside Hills. Ruby's final return to Newfoundland is sparked by a series of particularly self-destructive acts ending in a nearly fatal motorcycle accident: "I was tired of running, sick with my own fear of this thing that ran in my blood, that had pursued my father and his grandmother before him. 'I have to go home'" (2008, 285). And home she goes.

But from what is Ruby running and what does she fear? Newfoundland's fairy folklore has been passed on for generations, and Story's novel participates in this endeavour. The myth of the changeling, of children stolen and replaced by fairies, is a transhistorical and transcultural myth long used to explain congenital intellectual disabilities such as autism. Yet the tales recounted in Story's novel are as intricately linked to Newfoundland's geography as they are to Ruby's developmental and behavioral anomalies. Indeed Ruby's downward spiral reflects the defacement of the Southside Hills by land developers including the construction of the Arterial Road and a sewage treatment plant: "A giant wound had opened up in the Hill. Pale striated rock lay bared, seeping precious fluid from the creases, a bite, a gash in the massive rock that had been my yard, my place, the backdrop to my whole life" (2008, 57).

Story notes in a postscript that her description of Newfoundland's urban development disregards chronological accuracy. However, because such changes affect both the landscape and its human communities, she argues that the thematic resonances of the novel's setting prevail over the need for descriptive precision. This reader is inclined to agree. In addition to the natural landscape, the omnipresence of dilapidated houses (e.g. Ruby's parents' home) and structures (e.g. her grandparents' garden wall) serves as a metaphor for the family's bad blood and longstanding misfortune. It is therefore symbolic that Ruby suffers through an abortion in her parents' abandoned house and that her grandfather, resolved to hide the truth about his family, struggles to rebuild the garden wall every time it succumbs to soil erosion.

Story's attention to detail also permeates the novel's more fantastical elements. For example, Queenie's ruses to ward off fairies echo popular practices and belief. Among them include carrying bread or silver coins in your pockets, wearing

clothing inside out, cursing, and reciting your name backwards. In this respect, *Blasted* performs the task of storytelling long rejected by Ruby's family.

While not all of Story's readers will be familiar with Newfoundland geography, history, and folklore, these aspects complement the novel's deeper significance. One could read the novel as a metaphor for intergenerational family problems or, as I have done, for the purging of personal demons. A native Newfoundlander herself, the author has undoubtedly drawn from her own childhood experiences to enrich the local flavour of the novel. Yet stories of changelings are not specific to Newfoundland, thereby widening *Blasted*'s appeal. The Cree character Blue, for instance, shares with Ruby legends from his native Saskatchewan which are strikingly similar to those of Newfoundland. Story's choice reflects not only a desire to transmit Newfoundland folklore, it also caters to the popularity of fairy legends in the West from William Butler Yeats's 1886 poem "The Stolen Child" to Keith Donohue's 2006 novel of the same title.

Contrary to both Yeats and Donohue, the strength of Kate Story's narrative lies beyond the supernatural, providing the reader with a profound glimpse of the human psyche. If the novel seems cluttered with innumerable stock characters, including Ruby's sexual partners, annoying neighbours, childhood miscreant friends, and homosexual roommates, it does so to add depth to Ruby's character. Most are indicative of Ruby's inability to commit to relationships, react appropriately in social contexts, and even to mature into the adult woman she is meant to portray. For example, the frequent cameo appearances of Izzie, the concierge-cum-bag lady, capitalize on Ruby's unspoken fear of becoming destitute and homeless.

And this constant reminder of Ruby's bleak future would be quite effective if the reader were led to believe that Ruby's successful artist friends would one day cease to support her financially. One critique of the novel is therefore its unrealistic depiction of human relationships and degrees of tolerance. Near the end of the novel, Blue bemoans his new life sans Ruby: "No hysterical dawn phone calls. No drunken benders. No psychotic episodes" (2008, 318). Although Ruby's adventures and burlesque behaviour supply comic relief throughout the novel, the reader often wonders why her Toronto friends tolerate her. Or perhaps this renders their generous gift of paying for Ruby's expensive plane tickets to Newfoundland all the more believable.

Ruby's friends and their strange devotion to her, from disinfecting her spore-infected refrigerator to humouring insults during her drunken stupors, certainly defy understanding. If Ruby's repeated misadventures eventually result in an elevated sense of self, the reader is left to wonder how for her character does not seem particularly capable of such change. Throughout the novel, the protagonist shifts relentlessly between two extremes: on the one hand, a devoted friend and granddaughter; on the other, a reckless and self-absorbed drifter. Ruby's inconstancy suggests that her final career move as future accountant to the stars is

doomed to fail like so many of her previous exploits and personal relationships. Ironically, Ruby's crass character and bad language enable her to ward off the fairies: "I always knew my filthy mouth had to be good for something" (2008, 314).

Notwithstanding this critique, Story's first novel is well written with humorous depictions of Toronto's city life balanced with equally poetic descriptions of the Southside Hills. Those interested in cynical realism will be as delighted with *Blasted* as those interested in regional folklore and mythology. By layering the ordinary with the fantastic, Kate Story's well-researched and well-developed plot outshines the novel's questionable character development making for a thoroughly enjoyable debut novel.

Jennifer Howell
University of Iowa

Peter R. Sinclair, and Rosemary E. Ommer, eds., *Power and Restructuring: Canada's Coastal Society and Environment*. St. John's, NL: ISER, 2006, 336 pp., two 4-colour maps and three 4-colour maps, bibliography, CAN \$31.95 (soft cover), ISBN 1-894724-04-2.

A COLLECTION OF diverse and often historically detailed case studies, *Power and Restructuring: Canada's Coastal Society and Environment* offers a unique picture of the challenges facing communities located in Canada's furthest Western and Eastern coasts. A *Coasts Under Stress* project, editors Peter Sinclair and Rosemary Ommer present an examination of coastal communities experiencing economic, social and health care restructuring. This collection aims to identify themes in the challenges faced by coastal communities and aspires to begin building strategies for solving the problems that result from fluctuating ecology and shifting social policy. The book uses an integrated approach, focusing on the inseparable relations between humans and nature. More specifically, the volume aims to contribute towards sound policy development and the empowerment of communities.

These eleven case studies present distinct stories of individuals facing challenges arising from power inequities, authoritarian structures, top-down management and external factors that restrain local people's access to power. The chapters also speak to the resistance and resilience of these rural coastal populations, the strong effective social institutions they build and the local knowledge they develop in response to diverse challenges. The various essays explore the struggles of Aboriginal communities, forest harvesters, mining-company town residents, health care providers, fishers and youth. The themes central to all the studies include the importance of building strong social-ecological networks of power within communities and developing shared internal and external objectives. The text concludes with an examination of potential theoretical approaches and perspectives that might be used to build the framework necessary for obtaining these goals.