

Edward Riche, *Easy to Like*.

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REVIEWS

Edward Riche, *Easy to Like*. Toronto: Anansi, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-887842-31-3.

IN NAMING HIS THIRD novel *Easy to Like*, Edward Riche must have anticipated reviews that would describe it as “easy to like.” The always cranky Steven Beattie writes, “A wine that is easy to like, for Elliot [winemaker/screenwriter/main character of the novel], is not as ultimately satisfying as a wine that divulges its riches only gradually, requiring patience, dedication, and a sophisticated palate to fully appreciate. Finally, that is perhaps the central problem with Riche’s novel: It’s easy to like.”¹ Beattie correctly implies that the novel could be less likable. From Juvenal to Samuel Johnson to Mordecai Richler, the tradition of satire to which Riche contributes typically attacks society with powerful indignation. Although Riche can be gleefully vicious, he is not forceful enough to confront Canada and its institutions in their entirety. However, Beattie, in resorting to easy plays on words, fails to acknowledge the full arc of Elliot’s character development and the nuances of Riche’s discussion on taste. If Elliot’s judgements on wine can be applied to the text, by novel’s end, Elliot is interested in sophistication — *and* he consents to make a wine that is “easy to like.” Riche does not have to create unity between the critical taste of his main character and the aesthetic construction of his novel; even if he did, Beattie’s criticism misses the distinction between easy to *like* and easy to *read*. Riche’s style of storytelling makes his novel fluent and entertaining, but seldom obvious or simple.

One of the most compelling elements of *Easy to Like* is how Riche creates and then subverts expectations for straightforward plot lines. The satire of Hollywood would be stale if not for Riche’s twist on the usual script. The story of the burnt-out sophisticated screenwriter struggling in the tasteless, amoral world of producers and agents has been told countless times in film. Examples include *Adaptation*, *Permanent Midnight*, *Barton Fink*, and most recently Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*. Elliot’s relationship with the Hollywood characters is sometimes predictable. But when he refuses to have sex with the wife of established producer Lucky Silverman, we do not expect Lucky will resent rather than appreciate the struggling screenwriter’s decision. The loony logic of Hollywood is explained by Elliot’s

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agent: “How do you think it makes him look, some hack won’t fuck his wife?” (87). Unlike the aforementioned films about Hollywood screenwriters, *Easy to Like* depicts the pressures forced on producers. In Elliot’s transition from writer to head of English programming for the CBC, Riche’s satire expands from a caricature of a small but powerful collection of Hollywood kooks to a critique of corporate structuring and taste.

Riche offers funny, lucid, and occasionally tough observations of Canadians and their institutions. Highlights include when an Air Canada steward refers to his employer as a “Piece of shit outfit” (56) and when MBAs are compared to “Mayan high priests” (108). In a book full of great one-liners, some of the most cutting are about Newfoundlanders:

“What’s the show?”

“*Tiny Newfies*.”

“‘*Tiny Newfies*’?”

“It’s fun. We tested the pilot. Canadians love tiny Newfies.”

“What about Newfoundlanders?”

“As long as it’s about them, they’re fine with it. You’ll find they’re needy in that way.” (290–1)

Of Canadians, Riche more gently observes, “The most puzzling aspect of the national personality was its self-satisfaction. This was strange, because it was twinned with a persistent self-doubt” (187). In discussing Canadian identity, Riche relies heavily on comparisons to the United States. This juxtaposition is inevitable since the novel is set in California and Toronto, not only because the two countries are side by side. My complaint, in this instance, is less about the book and more about our national identity. America is so pervasive in Canadian thought that even in defining ourselves we rely on it as a contrast. Riche references our national smugness (we might be flawed, but at least we’re not American) on more than one occasion, but he does not escape it. His Hollywood remains a brainless boogeyman to art, and although the floundering, dimwitted CBC is Riche’s main target of satire, there is still something decent (and likable) about his representation of our national broadcaster.

There is no doubt that Riche has the potential to be scathing and ruthless. Midway, the narrative veers romantic. Hazel Osler, Elliot’s underling, returns from St. John’s “transformed by the salt air and wind” (149). When Elliot kisses her on the cheek, the professional awkwardly chafes against the personal. Eventually, they consummate their relationship, but she winds up puking in his toilet and saying, “Breakfast? No. Not breakfast together. Fucking you was bad enough” (212). Suffice to say, Riche has avoided the inclusion of a romantic storyline to appeal to a broader readership. A second example of Riche’s cruel streak is the demise of Elliot’s boss, Victor Rainblatt, who suffers from a lack of balance due to the fact that his “semicircular canals no longer ... [give] him any sense of ... space” (150).

Guess what happens after Rainblatt says, ““Come out to the balcony.... It’s time for a toast”” (254)? I will hint that Elliot’s boss cannot fly. Riche’s novel is by no means “easy to like,” but despite these examples, he remains a few letters short of Richler’s heights of savagery. For Riche to truly take his place among Canada’s best satirists, he needs to step onto his own metaphorical balcony. If he believes deeply enough in satire, then he will leap recklessly, splattering his indignation onto the smug sidewalk of our national consciousness.

Note

¹Steven Beattie, “Book Review: *Easy to Like*, by Edward Riche,” *National Post*, 9 Sept. 2011, para. 9. At: <arts.nationalpost.com/2011/09/09/book-review-easy-to-like-by-edward-riche/>.

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Willeen G. Keough, *The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-231132-02-2.

THE SLENDER THREAD: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860, by Willeen Keough, a historian at Simon Fraser University, is a lengthy (542 pages), deeply researched, and well-written study of Irish Catholic (and some Protestant) women who lived on the southern shores of Newfoundland’s Avalon Peninsula from the late 1600s to the mid-1800s, particularly between about 1750 and 1860. This review is based on the printed text, although *The Slender Thread* was produced initially as a Gutenberg e-book, with “digital images, artwork, audio, video, and hyperlinks that allow the reader to experience the full meaning of this scholarly work” (ii). Yet, the printed text alone is very impressive. Combining extensive historical research, in oral as well as written sources, with perspectives drawn from anthropology, ethnography, folklore, and gender studies, *The Slender Thread* is a major work that makes important contributions to Irish diaspora and women’s and gender studies, generally, as well as to Newfoundland and Canadian history. In all respects, it is a worthy extension of John Mannion’s classic *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Toronto, 1974), which remains one of a handful of truly seminal studies of Irish migration and overseas settlement.

Keough’s principal thesis is that “plebeian” Irish Catholic women on the southern Avalon enjoyed unusual degrees of personal and collective “agency,” especially when compared with their middle-class Protestant contemporaries in