

Wayne Johnston. *The Son of a Certain Woman*

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160 Reviews

Wayne Johnston. *The Son of a Certain Woman*. Toronto: Knopf, 2013.
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Fans of Wayne Johnston's writing will find themselves in very familiar territory in *The Son of a Certain Woman*: St. Johnston's, Oldlostland. To echo Stuart Pier-son's assessment of Annie Proulx's Newfoundland in his review of *The Shipping News*, Johnston's St. John's, depicted in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, *The Divine Ryans*, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, *The Navigator of New York*, and else-where, is "a bit athwart of the real thing" (153). So, readers, welcome back to St. Johnston's, where social misfits of a literate bent rail eloquently against autocratic perversions of government and religion seemingly put in place solely to oppress such social misfits. The newest combatant in this ongoing battle between good and too-good-to-be-talked-to is Percy Joyce, a boy whose body looks bruised and battered even before the conflict begins. Born with "False Someone's Syn-drome," Percy is covered with port wine birthmarks, possessed of oversized hands and feet, and encumbered by "a swollen lower lip of the sort associated with a lack of intelligence and that made me speak as if there was still some freezing left from a trip to the dentist's" (6). Percy lives in downtown St. John's with his single mother, the impossibly beautiful, lusted-after, gossiped-about Penelope Joyce; boarder "Pops" MacDougal, vice-principal of the school Percy will eventually attend; and permanent visitor Medina Joyce, Percy's paternal aunt and Penelope's lover. Fatherless, repulsive, mocked, feared, and privy to family secrets that could destroy everyone he loves, Percy appears equipped with all the Aristotelian devices needed to set the hero on his journey towards *anagnorisis*. But Percy adds one more complication to his life, which propels his narrative and is as old as tragedy itself: Percy Joyce wants nothing more than to sleep with his mother.

Some reviewers have found the subject matter objectionable, even gross. Because it is. Percy tells readers of his desire in the first sentence of the novel and this desire drives every line in the book and motivates Percy's every action. Too overt to be Oedipal, Percy's taboo lust is not a shame he keeps to himself, nor is it an obsession his mother dissuades fully when he reveals it to her or when he lobbies her for a "pity fuck" (177). Though many readers may find themselves unable to bear Johnston's detailed labouring over Percy's every twisted, perverted thought, it is actually the most commendable part of a rather flawed novel. Johnston is unflinching in his depiction of Percy's mother-love and it makes for some of the author's most powerful and personal passages.

This is not to say this intensity salvages the novel. It took me three tries to

get through the first 100 pages. I may not have done so had I not promised to write a review of the book. I am glad I eventually made it through, for I was rewarded with about 200 pages of Johnston's trademark excellent, compulsively readable, witty, well-paced narration. But the book is over 400 pages long, which is about twice the length it needs to be, and twice as long as these characters can power a narrative. One reviewer, no doubt making much of the Oedipal drives of Percy Joyce, claims the characters are like those in a Greek tragedy, striding on stage and delivering grandiose speeches rather than participating in actual dialogues. I can accept this reading and suspend my disbelief only so far, as I found these overdone, overlong, self-important soliloquies too masturbatory in a narrative already driven too much by masturbation. Witness Penelope's scolding of Pops upon discovering he has taken five-year-old Percy out of the house without her permission:

You are our boarder. Not our avuncular boarder. Not our good-with-children boarder. Not our pitches-in-to-help-when-he-can boarder. Not our almost-like-one-of-the-family boarder. Not our unexpected boon of a boarder. Not our godsend-to-the-Joyces boarder. I do not need you and Percy skipping back and forth to Brother Rice in front of everyone. You are our boarder, the Joyce's boarder. Otherwise, you are Pops, period. And if from now on you so much as take Percy out on the steps, you will be known as the Joyce's former boarder. The erstwhile boarder. The long-since-replaced boarder. The boarder in search of a new situation. The boarder more abruptly expelled than any other in the history of room and board. The boarder in search of a forwarding address. The boarder they call Mariah—like the wind (83).

Who speaks this way? Moreover, who lets oneself be spoken to in this way? At least in Johnston's other novels such long-winded, acid-tongued characters eventually find themselves alone, having long ago tried the patience of anyone who knows them. Uncle Reginald has been banished to the attic apartment of his family home in *The Divine Ryans*, making a captive audience of his pre-pubescent nephew Draper Doyle, the only member of the Ryan clan not exhausted by the token family patriarch, and the recipient of his special brand of "oralysis." In *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Charlie Smallwood raves against his homeland and his place in it as he moves through his house between an ocean-facing deck and a city-facing deck poetically pontificating, but almost never in the immediate presence of a family member: Joe, his mother,

and siblings praying for silence from behind the closed doors of their bedrooms. Sheilagh Fielding, the fictional foil to Johnston's fictionalized Joe Smallwood in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, lives a solitary existence due in large part to her irrepressible tendency to eviscerate linguistically most of the population of St. John's. At one point in the novel she retreats to a railway shack, living the life of a hermit as Newfoundland enters Confederation with Canada. In *The Custodian of Paradise*, Fielding exiles herself to a smaller island off the coast of Newfoundland, her steamer trunks her only audience. Not so Penelope Joyce. People seem to have an infinite patience for her and will make room in even the most heated argument for her holding forth. It is inexplicable and grows tiresome, especially when the payoff for her dressing down of Pops is a cringe-inducing pun hardly worth the journey: "Once more, Pops, just once more and you'll be ideally suited to write a book. You could call it *A View Without a Room*" (83).

There are other narrative idiosyncrasies and irregularities that distract the reader from the novel. A minor one occurs early as Percy describes the state of his home at 44 Bonaventure Avenue. The house is described first as relatively Spartan: "Our furnishings looked like the temporary, make-do ones of a family that had arrived far in advance of its belongings. Though cramped, the adjoining living room and dining room seemed all but empty as so much of the shag-carpeted floor was left exposed" (26). Yet, in the same chapter, the house is described differently. The "all but empty" rooms and "exposed" floors are now "treacherously cluttered" with hundreds of books: "Second-hand books, library books, hardcover, paperback and pocket editions lay haphazardly scattered on almost every flat surface — floors, tables, countertops, chairs, even beds. . . . It looked as if we were not so much readers as we were hoarders of books. Pops and Medina nudged them aside to make room for their ashtrays, beer bottles, dinner plates and elbows" (32–33). Both descriptions appear not to capture a moment in time but the continued condition of the house, which appears to be vacant and chaotic simultaneously.

Another example of untidy writing occurs later and is a little more troubling. Penelope has delayed as long as possible her son's entry into school and his exit from the protective womb of her home. She finally permits six-year-old Percy to start first grade at St. Bon's, having kept him home an extra year. The night before her son's first day of school, Penelope weeps openly in front of him, lamenting, "Tomorrow's his first day of school, and the last one of life as he knows it" (88). Her bawling reaches a crescendo as she cries in Medina's arms: "I can't let *them* have him, can I? I can't just send him off like a lamb to the

slaughter” (89). The next morning, Penelope still cannot hold back her tears and gives Percy so powerful a parting hug “I felt something snap in my back” (90). When Percy returns at the end of the day and reports the endless list of names he was called by his classmates, Penelope is inconsolable. Yet, a mere 15 pages later, Percy informs the readers that “Every day after I got home from school my mother sent me to Collins’s store at the top of the hill, well off Bonaventure, to buy her two packs of cigarettes” (105). Apparently there is no store closer than Collins’s and the once-protective Penelope has no trouble sending her son past several schools for a double dose of the harassment he gets while in class: “I had to walk back up the hill past Brother Rice, past our rival school St. Pat’s, take a left off Bonaventure just before St. Bon’s, walk another half-dozen blocks, buy the cigarettes and ten cents’ worth of something for myself, and return home” (106). Penelope, who once held so tenaciously to Percy, now has no trouble casting him out. In fact, she now doubts the seriousness of the taunting she once dreaded when it was hypothetical: “I walked twice daily — up the hill, down the hill — through a gauntlet of threats that didn’t sound as empty as my mother thought they were” (107). How is such a transformation possible? Most depictions of Penelope describe a strong-willed, stubborn person of conviction. She does not seem as flighty or flaky as to move between such extremes, to scream hyperbolically about the “slaughter” of her child, then dismiss the threats of the very same slaughter as “empty.”

The occupants of 44 Bonaventure find themselves at odds with the Catholic Church whose schools spread across the “Mount” on which they live. The church’s obsession with the inner workings of the Joyce household are not explained adequately and the embodiment of this all-pervasive institution, Director McHugh, the head of the Christian Brothers who teach at the various boys’ schools, is a villain too over-the-top to be taken seriously. Johnston takes poetic licence to create catacombs connecting all seven Catholic schools, through which McHugh can slink subterraneously, and a towering panopticon, from which he can spy on much of St. John’s, including the Joyce’s home. The first meeting between McHugh and Percy occurs during Pop’s unsanctioned expedition with Percy and is reminiscent of a Disney cartoon villain’s toying with the innocent protagonist: “So, this is the little Joyce boy who won’t be starting school until he’s six,’ he said, putting his index finger under my chin and raising my face, which he examined at length, his eyes moving slowly as if he was memorizing my every feature” (79). McHugh’s thick white hair, chin wattle, and absurdly ominous presence made it very hard for me not to imagine him as a male version of Ursula, the sea-witch from *The Little Mermaid*.

Which in turn made it very difficult for me to invest meaningfully in Percy's situation.

As I kept reading *The Son of a Certain Woman*, making notes, I began to feel that maybe I was not the right person to write a review of this book. I have read everything Johnston has written, some books three times. I'm a fan — I've pushed *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* on every friend and family member. Perhaps a reader not so familiar with Johnston's *oeuvre*, perhaps a reader for whom *The Son of a Certain Woman* is his or her first encounter with Johnston's writing, would make a fairer reviewer than I, for whom the rambling witticisms have grown stale. I was disheartened to see some recycled material here. In truth, I was confused when I first heard news of this novel: a story revolving around a quirky misfit of a boy, coming of age in 1960s St. John's, struggling against an oppressive Catholicism, whose security is threatened by the secret homosexuality of a parent. Has not Johnston already done this, more expertly and more succinctly, in *The Divine Ryans*? Penelope's impromptu creation of several cheerleader chants celebrating the bloodiest events in history of the Catholic Church reads like something Ted O'Malley, the father in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, would come up with on an off day. Penelope's "sermon," projected from her back steps to the neighbourhood that has been persecuting both her and her child, recalls Johnston's depiction of a raving Charlie Smallwood. There's a lengthy passage in the middle of the book during which Percy, apropos of nothing, begins reflecting on what it meant for his fellow islanders to have Confederation "conferred upon them while they slept on March 31, 1949. They went to bed Newfoundlanders and woke up Canadians" (255). The passage seems stitched into the narrative and reads like a cast-off musing from Fielding that did not make it into *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* or *The Custodian of Paradise*. For me, Johnston's most egregious act of recycling occurs in the same chapter. Johnston has garnished his narrative with passages and paraphrases from W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Percy's namesake, Percy Bysshe Shelley. In *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, a young Joe Smallwood imagines freezing to death during his island-wide walk to unite railway workers and paraphrases Shelley's "Ozymandias": "They would find me, perished here, I thought. Around the remains of that pathetic wretch, the lone and level snows stretched far away" (224–25). Standing on Signal Hill in St. John's, Percy Joyce sees the wreck of the smallpox sanatorium, "beyond which the lone and level sea stretched far away" (253). Percy continues to paraphrase Shelley as he imagines himself "King of Kings" of all he surveys, then botches the next line: "Look, ye Mighty, on my works and despair" (257). Shelley's actual line reads

“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” It is disappointing to see a writer returning to the same well using the same leaky bucket.

Readers for whom *The Son of a Certain Woman* is a return to St. Johnston’s, Oldlostland, may find this visit somewhat less satisfying than previous trips. Percy Joyce is a compelling, complex character and though his perspective is different, he is showing readers many of the same sites they have already seen through the eyes of Bobby O’Malley, Draper Doyle Ryan, Joe Smallwood, Sheila Fielding, and others. Johnston’s unwavering portrayal of the unconventional love and sexuality between Percy and his mother is commendable — all the more so because Johnston makes it understandable. What is less commendable is having these characters plod through plots and places already too familiar to visitors of St. Johnston’s.

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Michael Winter. *Minister Without Portfolio*. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton Canada, 2013. ISBN 978-0-670-06715-2

For admirers of Michael Winter, his most recent novel, *Minister Without Portfolio*, will initially appear to be exploring some familiar ideas. The novel chronicles the maturation of Henry Hayward, a young man whose girlfriend abruptly ends their romance and leaves him spiritually and physically adrift. Hayward is a wayward soul, whose solution to his heartbreak is to “join an army-affiliated contracting crew that takes him to Afghanistan” (jacket flap). The attempt at self-escape goes terribly wrong when Henry and his friends are ambushed by a suicide bomber. Traumatized by the explosion and burdened by the guilty