

Beth Ryan. *What is Invisible.*

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leagues of whaling line over the years, and it is fine to see that they have winched-in such an authoritative and interesting result. Their work must surely stand as the most complete English-language analysis of a modern shore-whaling industry.

Robert Lloyd Webb
Phippsburg, Maine

Beth Ryan. *What is Invisible*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2003, ISBN 1-894294-61-0

READERS MAY BE SURPRISED to learn that Lisa Moore is not the only woman living in St. John's producing brilliant short stories. Moore's Giller Prize nominations for *Open* and her novel *Alligator*, and her appearances in several documentaries on Newfoundland and its literature ("The Rocks Here Tell Stories" and "Hard Rock and Water") have secured for her work a predominant and comparatively large position on any Newfoundland bookstore's "local interest" shelf. Yet tucked away somewhat less prominently along the shelf are wonderful short story collections by other authors, among them Jessica Grant, Libby Creelman, and Beth Ryan. Most notably, Beth Ryan's *What is Invisible* is a treasure waiting to be discovered. Ryan's stories brim with the vivid detail that seems to be the calling card of her fellow Burning Rock writers, yet her writing possesses a realism, an immediacy, and an accessibility that is sometimes lacking in the more impressionistic work of her colleagues.

As Wayne Johnston notes in his blurb on the back of the text, "*What is Invisible* takes us all over the wonderful city of St. John's and beyond." Ryan's stories deal largely with Newfoundlanders, though they are not always in Newfoundland. The opening and arguably best story is set in Fort McMurray, and focuses on the Newfoundland workers and their families who have migrated to Alberta to work the oil fields. "Northern Lights" is an intriguing examination of both the stability and shift in the character of an individual who participates in a mass exodus. The rather reserved Walter is trying his best to enjoy the 25th wedding anniversary of fellow expatriates in the surreal surroundings of Newfoundland shifted 7,000 kilometres west:

They could have been in the Legion back home for all anyone could tell. A two-piece band from Placentia is playing — one guy on electric guitar and the other on an electronic keyboard that imitates everything from a piano to a full brass band. A team of women is in the kitchen keeping an eye on the pots of pea soup and turkey soup simmering on the industrial-sized stoves. And, like home, everyone in the place is linked by blood or marriage or history with just about everyone else. (1)

Walter counters the increased sense of community that comes with diaspora with a dose of ironic distance: "People who you barely spoke to back home become your

best pals when you're living thousands of miles from home" (3). There is a sense of claustrophobia throughout this story, as Walter jokes, "Can't swing a cat around here without hitting someone from home" (14). There is also a sense of desperation, as Walter, surrounded even in this new town with so many people who knew him "back home," has regrettably carried his wallflower reputation with him to Fort McMurray. Yet, as in several of her stories, Ryan (literally) opens the door to change within the comforts and confines of community.

The individual as s/he exists within a close-knit community is the focus of several of these stories, and there is not a weak link in this chain. Though some readers may find the twist at the end of "The Lizard's Skin" slightly less profound or shocking than it might have been several years ago, it is still a wonderful and amusing depiction of one person's failed attempt at a romantic respite from home. Particularly strong are "The Patron Saint of Hitchhikers," which examines the shifting power dynamic among a trio of teenage girlfriends, and "Light Fingers," which details how one will often place social acceptance over happiness. The latter story focuses on the so-close-to-being-reqiuted relationship between Philomena who works in the restaurant at Woolworth's and Miguel, the "soft-eyed, beautiful, exotic" Portuguese sailor so unlike the "big, thick and stunned or small, sly, and weasel-faced" boys she grew up with (118). Miguel has finally asked the lovestruck Philomena "to the movie show at the Paramount theatre" (121), and "Philly" ("Miguel says 'Fee-lee' and it sounds beautiful, like a soap opera name") [119] floats through the middle of the story until being brought up short by Derek King, who works in the sports department: "the only girls who go out with the Portuguese are whores" (124). The culminating scene, when Philomena tells Miguel "I don't think I can go out with you," is heart-rending:

Philomena folds her arms firmly across her chest, trying to look stern. She turns away from Miguel's crumpled face for a second, ashamed that she's the one who is making him look so sad. She sees Derek King watching her from his post in the sporting goods department.... staring a straight line across the store that burrows right into her forehead.... "I can't go. I just can't. I should never have said yes in the first place.... We have no business being with each other." (126)

The communities of *What is Invisible* provide place as readily as they impose limitations, and it is in Ryan's depiction of these characters maintaining the former while pushing against the latter, that these stories truly come to life.

It is in the titles of these stories that the opposing and dominant forces of this collection are made evident: "Going Home," "Distance," "Family Business," and "Touching Down." Each story is preoccupied in some way with the concept of home, leaving it, returning to it, or leaving it without ever *really* leaving it. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry puts it in the passage Ryan has chosen as an epigraph: "what is essential is invisible to the eye." These characters carry essential parts of

themselves and their communities with them whether they are going on vacation, moving away for work, or losing their jobs. These individuals as they are moving or being moved from their home community always carry with them this former self. This connection is invisible, yet it leaves a permanent and distinguishing mark on each of these transitory characters. Ryan's realistic depiction of these complex characters in flux is what makes this collection so engaging and enjoyable.

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Kenneth J. Harvey. *Inside*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2006, ISBN 0-679-31427-X

NEWFOUNDLAND'S RESIDENT MASTER of horror and gore has abandoned both of these elements to produce his best book to date. In a banner year for Newfoundland literature that saw Wayne Johnston release *The Custodian of Paradise*, the anticipated sort-of-sequel to *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, and Russell Wangersky debut his brilliant first collection of short stories, *The Hour of Bad Decisions*, Harvey's *Inside* stands as the finest novel produced by a Newfoundlander in 2006. Walking along St. John's streets already well-trodden by Paul Bowdring, Michael Winter, and Lisa Moore, Harvey takes readers into the underbelly of this port city, into bars one does not enter unless he wants to fight his way out, into the decidedly ungentrified townhouses that do not appear in Richard Steele paintings, and into the lives of the people trapped in this world. *Inside* is the latest in a growing list of "St. John's novels" and it is certainly the darkest.

Harvey's protagonist is Myrden (readers are never told his first name) or "Mr. Myrden" as he is called by the reporters who hound him. The book begins with Myrden's release from prison after fourteen years (despite the "two years less a day" policy of Her Majesty's Penitentiary, Myrden appears to have served his entire sentence in St. John's — a narrative liberty readily forgiven as the immediate release of this caged alpha male into his original habitat only quickens this brutally swift novel). New DNA evidence has exonerated Myrden of the murder of Doreen Stagg — new evidence that further vilifies Myrden's ogreish former drinking companions who testified against him in the trial. The semi-human Grom, Squid, and Willis serve as foils throughout the novel, as the returned king of this urban jungle tries to reclaim his throne and ensure the safety of his daughter (trapped in an abusive relationship with Willis) and his granddaughter, the angelic Caroline, who need only say "Poppy" to cloud her otherwise stoic grandfather's eyes with tears.

Myrden is plagued on his return by sycophantic friends and family and the relentless reporters who wait outside his home. The great parasite of this piece is