

## Ron Pumphrey. *Human Beans*.

Gail Weir

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Her stated reason was that “the lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach” (198). “Her desire to be sensitive to cultural difference outweighed her urge to make a feminist intervention” (198). It is hard to see how giving a woman aspirin for menstrual pain could be construed as “meddling.” Laurence used the girl prostitute as material for one of her stories. In her novel set in Africa, *This Side Jordan*, a European man, Johnny, “sexually brutalizes an inexperienced prostitute,” and then brutally rapes an African virgin who has been bought for him as a bribe (202). “The woman suffers pain so that Johnnie can have a moment of redemption” and recognize Africans as fellow-humans (204). Not every reader would agree with Roy that Laurence is not only “an anti-imperialist writer but also a ground-breaking feminist” (206).

Roy’s views on Laurence may not be shared by all, and the Laurence chapter raises some disturbing issues. Her controversial work indicates some of the inadequacies of her travel writers’ efforts to “map” their own and other cultures, but also the necessity of attempting to do so.

Roberta Buchanan  
Memorial University

Ron Pumphrey. *Human Beans*. St. John’s, 2007, ISBN 1-897317-09-9

RON PUMPHREY IS a well-known figure in eastern Canada and especially in his home-province of Newfoundland and Labrador, mainly because of his 1970s-1980s open line radio programmes where he greeted listeners with his exuberant “Hello my Lovelies.” That audience already knew that he had “the gift of the gab.” With this, the first installment of his autobiography, we discover that, not only can he tell a good story, he is one of that rare breed who can also translate that gift to paper, with words and images that jump off the page and engage the reader.

While his previous books were mainly biographies that celebrated the lives of others, this work recreates the lives of the author, his immediate family, and the communities around them, told, for the most part, from the point of view of the growing boy. As with his speaking style, his writing style is flamboyant in this imaginative retelling of his first eight years. Some names have been changed to protect the innocent, but those familiar with Harbour Grace and Bell Island in the mid-twentieth century will know and remember most of those mentioned. Others will get a good sense of the local citizenry. The book is full of the joys of childhood, with a generous dose of the fears, misgivings, and disappointments. Pumphrey writes about it all with enthusiasm and great sense of discovery.

More than the antics of a young boy growing up in a rapidly-changing world, this is an anthropological study of the era as seen through the fresh eyes of an inquisitive child. There is honesty and true wonder in his unfolding comprehension of the ways of the Depression-era world. This book is rich in folklore, sociology, natu-

ral history, linguistics, religious belief systems, and feminism in its infancy. There are insights into the all-powerful Roman Catholic church and its great hold on the hearts and minds of its people. We see the ravages of disease before wide-spread vaccination and today's wonder drugs, including the now-unknown phenomenon of household quarantine. Invalid family members are cared for at home as a matter of course and there is the ever-present spectre of death. Communities are made up of larger-than-life characters who are accepted as part of the social fabric.

We learn about the effects of World War I on Pumphrey's family. The man who would become his father was a true man of mystery. The British War Office declared Ike Pumphrey dead. To the amazement of all, more than a decade after the end of the war, he showed up back in Harbour Grace with a lump on the back of his head, reputedly put there by the butt of a German rifle, a blow that caused a loss of memory and kept him from home and family for so long. What his life was like in the interval became the subject of much speculation amongst the local gossips. Meanwhile, Ike's brother suffered shell-shock and, although he returned home in good time, he never fully recovered.

The book opens in 1929 with the traumatic return of 41-year-old Ike and his subsequent meeting and courtship of Mary Fleming. She being not even half his age, her mother is none too thrilled with this union. This part of the book is written in a prose style that is reflective of that era and may not be to everyone's taste today, but perseverance is well worth the effort. The author soon assumes his childhood-memory voice and the words begin to flow smoothly, catching the reader up in his youthful exuberance. We feel his sense of wonder as he explores the family's new home on Bell Island with its attic playroom crowned by an actual skylight, through which he can watch the stars and moon while dreaming of a life of adventure. His reliving of swinging off the dock at Harbour Grace overflows with a *joi-de-vivre* that is so rarely experienced in one's lifetime. As the little boy flies off the dock and over the water clinging to a rope, he realizes for the first time that all things are possible, and the reader's heart soars with him (204-206).

Pumphrey's recollection of everyday life of 70 years ago is extraordinary. There is beauty in the many small details, such as his recollection of his father lighting the fire in the wood/coal kitchen stove, for many readers a now-lost art which was so central to the daily routine at that time. He dreads the idea of starting school, where the school bully, Pug Sweeney, "used to beat up the students whether he liked them or not." But his parents prevail and he enters the world of priests and nuns who preach the horrors of sex, sin, and hell. The child interprets canon law as "big gun law" (161). His description of his first-grade teacher, Sister Madeline, explaining "eternity" is nothing short of amazing (118-120). On coming face-to-face with his tormentor, Pug, one day, he is "immobilizedly alarmed" but manages to execute his brazen revenge with all the ingenuity and precision of a Hollywood movie sting operation (154).

Descriptive phrases seem to flow as easily as ink from Pumphrey's pen. Some of his imagery will shock and perhaps appal, while simultaneously evoking memories of one's own childish shenanigans and shortcomings. There are moments of sorrow, but many more of humour. Pumphrey is at his most poignant, and funniest, when writing about his dread of his stern, secretive father, who keeps his mysterious box of papers hidden on the top shelf of his wardrobe. What will Ike do when he discovers that Little Ronnie has stood on tiptoe on a chair and pulled the locked box down into "my fear-heaving chest" (87)? It is a revelation to the young boy that his mother is less upset about his breaking open the box than he expected her to be but, instead, is as much interested in its contents as he is. One of the author's uncles was an actor/impersonator in the "mini-theatres of British Columbia and Toronto." When he began crashing St. John's parties dressed as a naval officer, Ike scoffed at the irony, saying that he "would get seasick if the wind blew across a saucer of tea" (127). These words are pure poetry, for not only do they draw an indelible picture of this man in a single unexpected phrase, but they transport the reader back to that first experience with hot tea, when mother poured the piping-hot liquid from the teacup into the saucer, and then blew on it so that it would cool quickly and not burn tender lips.

The book's setting moves from the once-thriving, but by now economically-depressed Harbour Grace, where Ron was born and where his grandparents lived, to Bell Island, where boom times are about to start with an increased demand for iron ore by Germany as it gears up for yet another war. His father found work with DOSCO, the operator of the mines, first as a mess-shack cook, and then as a company policeman. The setting then shifts back to Harbour Grace to round out this instalment of the author's life. This latter move illustrates a reality of many families in the days before the advent of the birth control pill, when older children, often the hard-to-control boys, were shuffled off to live with grandparents to take pressure off a young mother with too many babies to care for. In this case, Ron was the eldest son and the apple of both his grandmother's eye and that of his unmarried aunt. Is it any wonder he thought the world revolved around him?

The book's title comes from the child's misunderstanding of the words he thinks he hears the adults say when they refer to "human beings" in their Irish-Newfoundland accent. It could be subtitled "The Curse of the Torn Caul" as this circumstance of his birth surfaces many times throughout the book as his family tries to understand and explain the wild antics of their boy. To be born "in a caul" (a fetal membrane) was unique, a symbol of good luck and protection from evil, and a sign of future greatness. Unfortunately for little Ronnie, he was born with a torn caul, widely believed to be a sign of doom. "I came into the world not just with a fabled caul about my face, but a torn caul — some say a shredded one" (19).

Ron Pumphrey is the author of twelve previous books: eight volumes of *Who's Who and Why* in Newfoundland and Labrador, two books on prominent persons (J. R. Smallwood and the Crosbie family), one of "Newfie" jokes, and one of *Strange*

## 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.