

Patrick Warner. *Double Talk*. St. John's: Breakwater, 2011.

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“In almost every marriage there is a selfish and an unselfish partner. A pattern is set up and soon becomes inflexible, of one person always making the demands and one person always giving way.”

—Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head*

Patrick Warner's debut novel, *Double Talk*, would ring true to Iris Murdoch, chronicler of the complex power struggles that are our ordinary lives. Warner and Murdoch might differ, though, on the point of inflexibility. *Double Talk* reminds us that symbiosis and parasitism share a blurry, fluctuating boundary. For Warner, “the real question” remains “whether it [is] ever possible to truly know another person” (97). Skipping through time, shifting perspectives, folding back on itself, *Double Talk* is a book about the pleasures, paradoxes, and failures individuals experience within marriage.

Double Talk assumes a dyadic structure, alternating between Violet, whose tale is told in the third person, and Brian, her ex-husband, told in the first. This structure allows for complementary or contradictory reports. The act of domestic abuse that begins the novel and ends the marriage is one dramatic case: “she didn't see the punch coming. She just remembers the shock of pain. . . . He hit me, she remembers thinking. That asshole hit me” (13), versus “We were arguing and she blocked the door and wouldn't let me through. I pushed her out of the way and she fell” (24). The rest of the novel concerns events prior to this violence — adolescence, courtship, married life — such that the book that follows is haunted by its own doomed future.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Brian, self-absorbed but not self-aware, has failed to see that his marriage was a dead thing well before the punch that ends it: “Violet could always see . . . the deep structure, the hidden flaw. . . . It wasn't until our marriage foundered that I began to understand” (20-21). While Violet is more perceptive than Brian, her sections have the added benefit of third-person narration. This allows the articulation of thoughts and processes within Violet, which may also exist in Brian but cannot be described by him. The result is that Violet's sections are more intellectually

satisfying (and, to me, more enjoyable), but Brian's perhaps ring truer, even as his emotional and intellectual limitations frustrate. Sometimes, he is utterly clueless. For example, he resents "Violet's refusal to stand up to the cops on my behalf" (23) — the police in question were summoned by Violet when he knocked her down.

That said, it is Brian who most explicitly states the novel's preoccupation with doubleness and irony. Brian is taught about irony at university, and struggles with the concept: "if the meaning of what was being said was the opposite of what was literally being said, then how could you know what was really being said — huh? I knew my ability to make that distinction would eventually come, and on that day I would be able to say that I was now an educated man" (64). However, this day has yet to arrive. Brian is aware that irony operates in the world, but is unable to properly identify or use it. This leads him to self-doubt and paranoia about the true intentions of those around him. He bemoans "Doubleness, the Disease of Life," lamenting "there is no ordinary world anymore, no ordinary things No thing speaks for itself alone but speaks for its place in other things" (26). For Brian, doubleness is debilitation. There is no sense that this interplay of signs can liberate, no joy in escaping a tyrannical system of singular meaning. There is merely frustration: "who was to say which aspect of a person was the real person, and who was to say which version of the past was the true one?" (100).

But *Double Talk* is concerned with more than one kind of doubleness. Newfoundland author Lisa Moore, interviewed on *The Walrus Blog* a few years ago, claimed that Newfoundlanders possess "two separate identities mixing together": Canada and Newfoundland.¹ Neither Warner nor his two main characters are from Newfoundland, but all three have chosen to make a home in St. John's, and a diasporic double consciousness informs this novel. How this plays against "native" Newfoundlanders' (dual?) sense of cultural identity is intriguing. Brian, from Ireland, hurls many spears against Newfoundland nationalists, invested in likening the two islands: "they wanted to know what Ireland was like, and I responded by telling them that it was a lot like Newfoundland. In only a few short months, I had learned that this was the answer most Newfoundlanders wanted to hear. To give any other answer was to provoke consternation" (145). Some of these moments are very subtle and quick — secondary character Nancy is from Patrick's Cove, on the very Irish Cape Shore, but Brian describes her accent as a "kind of West-Country burr" (138) — English, in other words.

Despite this, Newfoundland exists as some strange in-between land, neither wholly European nor North American: "Newfoundland, Newfoundland. The

word washed through my mind, dragging with it a phosphorescent trail of wonder” (69). Brian, arriving in the 1980s as an undergraduate, expecting to lead a North American life, is disappointed that St. John’s cannot live up to the bill of goods sold him by American television. It is not “just like Ireland,” that pleasing lie Brian learns to tell, but it *is* something unexpected: “Newfoundland was a different world” (145). The sections where a young Brian adjusts to life in St. John’s are some of the best in the novel — anyone who has voluntarily uprooted him or herself, only to discover life in a new society alienating and difficult, will find grist for their mill here.

Violet’s reasons for relocating from British Columbia to Newfoundland are never articulated in the same way. It is clear she is in flight from her WASPish family, but any difficulty she, a mainlander, has in making a home, and feeling at home, are not closely examined, even though she has travelled a greater geographical distance, and, unlike Brian, has no family in St. John’s — as a student, Brian lives with his Uncle Wallace and his uncle’s partner, Geoff.

Indeed, Wallace and Geoff are a small but brilliant addition to the text. Via these secondary characters we experience difficulties facing gay couples in the 1980s: blackmail, failed attempts to adopt, and, ultimately, the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. They disappear from view for long periods, but are always welcome when they re-emerge into the text, enriching and complicating it as they do.

Warner is a poet as well as a novelist, and his prose is often (but not always) lyrical. One notable instance is this striking description of menstruation: “the long slow silk ribbons in her womb begin to unravel and smoothly slip” (53). A few passages are poetic, but a bit silly: “I could never look back on that day without feeling joy, without my saffron-coloured monkfish anima flickering with phosphorescence” (23) (the monkfish anima is neither explained nor does it return). Many lines are piercing in their simplicity, efficacy, and love for language: “the textured Newfoundland wind — part shard, part grit, part blade” (132).

At 235 pages, *Double Talk* is trim and swift, covering an ambitious diversity of topics: sex, gender, and power; diaspora, immigration, and fitting in; children and family life; culture and belonging; memory and narrative—all contained within the loving claustrophobia of a marriage. Threading through all of these is its organizing principle of doubleness, manifest in the life of a couple. It is an admirable first novel, worthy of attention.

NOTE

- 1 Suzannah Showler, "Once Moore, With Feeling," *The Walrus Blog*, 5 Nov. 2009, at: <walrusmagazine.com/blogs/2009/11/05/once-moore-with-feeling>.

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