

Waking Up in the City of Dreams. Bryan Hennessey.

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HELEN PETERS

WAKING UP IN THE CITY OF DREAMS is a carefully structured collection of eleven short stories which describe the interconnected lives of a group of friends as they grope their way from adolescence to adulthood in and out of St. John's through the 1960s and 1970s. The central character, Winston Anthony Fleming, is both narrator and character in events which occur sporadically. Fleming's own life is depicted from boyhood to manhood. We meet him first in the mid 1950s as the boy, Anthony, secure in his family, his Roman Catholic faith and in his birthplace, St. John's, a small, vibrant and comfortable place with a television window to North America, a connection which is manifested in the cultural icon, Mickey Mouse. In "A Tale of Two Mickeys" (c. 1956), Hennessey juxtaposes the North American Mickey with a local one, the frightening, cloudy-eyed, drooling, stinking inhabitant of the downtown streets, Mad Mickey, who kisses Anthony on the forehead as he blesses the boy while he accidentally relieves him of his most prized possession – his Mickey Mouse hat. The manner in which local life admits the influence of the world outside St. John's yet manages to subdue it to the city's own character, as seen in Anthony's childhood experience, is a feature in the lives of all the characters whom Hennessey brings together in this work. The city is pulsating with energy, sometimes beautiful, often dirty and squalid, never confining, and it is hated and loved with almost passionate intensity.

Adolescence presents Anthony as Wince, a character in "Girleens in BeatleLove" (c. 1964), a story of chums Noreen (Roman Catholic) and Phyllis (Protestant) in which Noreen catches up with Phyllis's more sexually-mature interests by expanding her innate love of folk music and Bob Dylan to include the Beatles when *A Hard Day's Night* plays in the downtown cinema. Wince's role is to introduce Noreen to John Lennon as the author of *In His Own Write*, which awakens her enthusiasm for the Beatles, and to take her to see the film,

which awakens the first feelings of love for each other that these two people will share later.

In the central story, "City of Light, City of Magic" (c. 1968), Win (the baptismal name Anthony long-abandoned as a sign of his apostasy) and the other members of his hard-living, church-abandoning, university-neglecting group crowd their evenings with casual sex and drunken binges in squalid apartments and noisy nightclubs, having failed in attempts to make sense of their lives. Leo, Davie, Pender, Austin, Polly, Joanne and Win's sexually active days and nights blur together in an alcoholic haze; only the city appears to offer spiritual solace, but it is not enough. Win and his long-standing and close friend Leo enter Bannerman Park on a damp, moonlit night in May:

Leo raised both hands in benediction and cried aloud, "Awake! Arise! Revive!"

He turned abruptly, his outstretched hands gripping Win's shoulders.

"Wake up! Live! Strike a match on the flint of your petrified soul! Give yourself a break! Give yourself a little light, you dark-hearted, cold-brained bastard! Nothing's too good for the last poet in St. John's."

Win wondered if he was talking to himself. In the shadows of the echoing bandstand, he couldn't make out the expression on Leo's face. Leo stood transfixed by some nameless emotion, until Win began in a soft voice their carefully compiled St. John's Litany.

"City of Light!"

Leo automatically replied, "Deliver us, O Lord!"

"City of Magic!"

"Deliver us, O Lord!"

"City of Thwarted Ambitions!"

"Have mercy on us!"

"City of Disillusioned Dreams!"

St. John's cannot fulfil the boys' needs nor those of their friends. Singly they leave, collect together again in slummy apartments across Canada to experiment with drugs, alternative religions and beer; in time, singly and together they return to live in the city of their birth.

Hennessey calls his work a "fractured novelette" and it is. Win is alternately narrator and character in the interconnected stories, as Hennessey experiments with forms which include first and third person narration of stories, diary entries and a letter. "The Last Summer" (c. 1969) is a letter from Noreen to Phyllis which gives a heart-rending account of her marriage to Jack as a drug-induced Odyssey from St. John's to Montreal to Vancouver to Halifax to, finally, home where she becomes romantically involved with Win and goes with him to England. Win's account of their sojourn in London, "Travels with Win" (c. 1970-71), is in diary form and reveals that Newfoundlanders, throwing off their British colonial past, have a strong sense of identity as Newfoundlanders and have developed a closer sense of affinity to Canada and North America than to their former "mother country."

In the end, most of Hennessey's characters live in St. John's and further the process of developing their sexual, spiritual, social and economic beings, marrying and having children; in so doing they repeat their version of the process of their parents and of their parents before them. *Waking Up in the City of Dreams* is a fascinating and compelling story of a recent evolution in St. John's culture. Hennessey's characters are lifelike, and the pain in their stories is confidently told in language that is realistic, sensitive, powerful and poetic.