

Kenneth J. Harvey. *Inside*.

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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.

Paul Chafe

Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University

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

Myrden's wife, a marvellous depiction of desperation and deviousness, who promptly uses the media exposure to align herself with her newly absolved husband and claw continuously closer to Myrden's impending settlement:

His wife hanging onto him. Hugging too hard. Her bony grip strong for such a small woman. She'd come to see him inside. Once a month maybe. Tell him what he had done wrong. Why he was in there. Tell him about her problems.... Now, she was hugging him. Squeezing his arm. Laughing back at the crowd. "Innocent as the lamb," she said to everyone. "Knew it all along." (8)

Myrden's bloodsucking wife combined with the promise of a violent clash between Myrden and his former toadies grown brave in his absence cloud this novel with impending disaster. In truth, Harvey has set this book in David Adams Richards country, complete with a more-than-flawed hero searching for something decidedly less than redemption, unrepentant villains who seem to abhor anything related to innocence or happiness, and a too-perfect child perhaps destined to exit this world early like so many Dickensian darlings before her. As Myrden rekindles his star-crossed relationship with the well-born Ruth, *the* woman before his wife, and receives a lucrative settlement that promises to free his daughter and granddaughter from the brutal and cowardly Willis, the reader cannot help but feel this is an all too fleeting taste of happiness that will be quickly soured. Surely Myrden's wife will find a way to squander this money. Perhaps Willis will go too far one evening, robbing Myrden of his only source of happiness. Certainly Grom is only waiting for the perfect moment to move against the man he has already betrayed. Or maybe Myrden, still walking perilously close to the life that led to incarceration, will slip over that edge and return to his jail cell.

With so much potential for disaster, *Inside* is not a leisurely read. This urgency is compounded by Harvey's abrupt prose. There likely is not a sentence in this novel over ten words long. The terseness can be alienating for the reader (as is probably Harvey's intention), but it also helps reiterate the madness of Myrden's world — the hundred things happening at once to a man overcome with revenge, responsibility, and the need to reshape his life. Here is Myrden before the countless microphones of reporters he knows still think he is guilty, a polished bad apple:

The microphones in his face. Closer. Their feet on the pavement. Waiting for a reaction from him. The cameras going faster. His face changing. He could feel it. He tried to find the words. Not the ones he wanted. His lips just twisted. His shoulders bunched together. He looked at the other faces watching him. Men and women. Silent and watching him or checking their recorders. Not a single one of them decent. Anything to further the pain. Anything. He shook his head and sniffed. Turned and walked away. The voices and shouts came again with their questions. Trailing after him. (18)

One reviewer referred to this style as "mimetic tedium," but many will be engaged by it, eagerly skimming the choppy sentences to keep up with the story. There is cer-

tainly an amount of realism to it, as Myrden is himself a man of few words, revealing little of himself, and always suspicious of the more verbose characters. A particular St. John's dialect is captured in this staccato, as evidenced in the one-way conversation of a woman speaking into the phone discussing her husband's post-heart attack condition: "Yes, he's walking now. He's up and around. He just went out to the corridor. Now, he's coming back in. He's gonna lie down, I think. You gonna lie down? Are you? Yes, he's gonna lie down. There he goes. Lying down" (171-172). There is also a beautiful passage describing how "[p]laying pool with a woman was not about the game" that captures so much in so little and (for this reviewer) explodes any notion of "mimetic tedium."

The brisk and brutal nature of the book is complemented by its immediacy. Harvey does not linger too long on the back stories of his characters. The readers never actually discover what happened on the night of Doreen Stagg's murder. Myrden's life before incarceration is not deeply probed, and though readers can be certain that Myrden was quite the bastard, they never learn how he scarred his children, or if he is largely responsible for his wife's predatory ruthlessness. Harvey alludes to the complexities of his characters, but leaves much in the dark. This is particularly true of Randy, Myrden's one true friend whose wisecracking nature hints at an intelligence and sensitivity that could raise him above the hard ticket role he relishes: "The smart kid in school. Always the smart kid. Smart kid in with the tough kids. Trying to hide it" (19). While Randy is in prison for administering a bloody beating that leaves both Grom and Squid in comas, Myrden takes refuge in his friend's abandoned apartment and discovers Randy is also an artist, a talent Randy hides like a secret shame, especially when Myrden visits him in jail to give him his art supplies: "'Are you nuts?' Randy leaned forward. Across the table. Whispering: 'You wanna get me killed?'" (155). Also unexamined is the relationship between Randy and Myrden, which is easily the most loving in the text. One senses there is more to Randy's constant ribbing of Myrden, his demands for his newly released friend to dye his hair because "[y]ou know I prefer blondes," his waking Myrden one morning then rifling through the wife's closet for dresses that would suit them, or telling the police officers who question the two of them on the St. John's waterfront "It's our first date" (21, 112).

This novel is a taut and lean presentation of a few telling months in the life of its protagonist. All the fat has been trimmed and not one word is used superfluously. The rapid fire narration and unprobed depth of the characters combine to create a quick and consuming tragedy of missed opportunities and unfixable mistakes. Harvey has designed his novel to go by too quickly, to both enrapture and aggravate readers who are compelled to move forward despite their desire to pause and pro-

long Myrden's moments of happiness. *Inside* overwhelms while leaving its readers desperate for more — and such is the mark of any great novel.

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Catherine Safer. *Bishop's Road*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2004, ISBN 1-894294-78-5

A REVIEW OF FICTION conventionally features a plot summary. This review of Catherine Safer's debut novel, *Bishop's Road*, might fall short of readers' expectations. No plot summary could adequately condense Safer's novel, partly because the book already feels, in many ways, like a series of plot summaries. It's not that *Bishop's Road* lacks a plot; rather, this novel is overstocked with plotting. A sampling of these plots includes: enforced stint in asylum; incest; prostitution; gaybashing; windfall inheritance from invisible mother; sudden fame at modelling; abusive boss; child raised unbeknownst by uncle; incarceration; reincarnation; miscarriage; unwanted child; post-traumatic muteness; performing "Nativity"; spousal abuse (physical, psychological, emotional); and murder. The plot details lend themselves to comparison with serial television programming, rather than with the fragmented narratives of Pat Barker's *Union Street* or Thomas Pynchon's pastiches. Although readers may be compelled by Safer's play with dialect and narration and perhaps initially tantalized by the foreshadowing of such melodramatic plots, they will probably be disappointed by their rapid resolutions.

The primary setting, a boarding house that was formerly a convent on Bishop's Road in downtown St. John's, promises at the novel's start to be densely symbolic. Wedged between a Catholic church and a school, and up the road from a former orphanage, the house is depicted from the outset as being "quite familiar with haunted dreams" (2). Though Father Delaney from next door has vowed never to return there (19), the house's ghostliness is never connected to its former religious tenants. Instead, a series of secular characters drag around their own repressed memories, and many of the novel's plots involve an exposure of these characters' pasts. The central cast includes Mrs. Mifflin, who runs the boarding house, and five tenants: Eve, Ruth, Ginny Mustard, Maggie, and Judy. Each of these characters, as well as a few others (including Dorrie and Joanie, who become perhaps too central as the novel progresses), has suffered some form of abuse. Indeed, the novel could be read as a laying bare of various forms of spousal and child abuse.

The mysterious forces causing the initial "disturbance" (18) within the house remain unclear. An odd atmosphere pervades, perhaps the result of restless, reincarnated Eve — yes, of *The Garden* — who "is generally content but for missing Adam" (8) and is on an "earth walk" (158) or perhaps because of troubled and troublesome Judy, who has "something hovering about her and shining through her