

## Sarah Tilley, *Skin Room*.

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Breakwater, 1988), we notice that the diary points at the warring beliefs mentioned at the beginning of this review. Society insists that our life should be a path signalled with clearly-defined goals. However, this notion goes against the intimate knowledge that each day is an autonomous space which baffles what we are supposed to be already.

In the Spanish literary tradition, the journal genre has been interpreted very differently than in Newfoundland or in Canada. Influential literary theorists in Spain have looked at it as a form destined for that which is insignificant and inessential in life. Defined as a ghostly form of *écriture* and a suitable medium for female submissive domesticity — also for situations of personal disconnection between private and public life — it is considered the ideal outlet for dissociated, unadjusted personalities. This context of understanding the journal has been different in Canada, where the woman's journal of the reluctant but resourceful immigrant has been foundational, one of the first canonized literary forms. Revised and reconstituted under many guises, it is one of the pillars of an institutionalized Canadian culture since Margaret Atwood imagined Susanna Moody. The journal acquires other purposes in Newfoundland when it helps to weave memories and collective situations that define and make cohesive a historically marginal community. Thus understood, the journal becomes a form that addresses a smaller audience, and that recognizes places, turns of language, social circumstances, objects, and situations. It is no longer an allegedly secret or private text but a shared possession; it establishes a common ground for recognition. It is a form of writing also in practice in other off-centre communities in Canada and is increasingly being published and gaining textual respectability, therefore allowing readers with other backgrounds to incorporate into our imagination peoples and places that have not been given much currency so far.

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Sarah Tilley, *Skin Room*, Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2008, ISBN 9781897141205.

SARAH TILLEY'S FIRST NOVEL is a double-vision narrative of interior and exterior landscapes in the face of a disrupted childhood. The story slips between Teresa Norman at age 12 and in her early twenties, elucidating the profound impact of cultural and physical landscapes on a youthful mind. As much as she tries to keep the stories of the past and the present compartmentalized, Teresa's interior life demonstrates the impossible task of rendering the two strands separate. Inevitably — healthily — the two stories do not run parallel to each other, but intersect. The novel's development is organized around this inescapable march towards colliding selves, spaces and stories.

Teresa's childhood is inflected by Tilley populating her protagonists' small world with beings, myths and literary figures. When her parents' marriage dis-

solves, twelve-year-old Teresa finds herself transported from the St. John's landscape of her mother's mentally ill ravings — paintings of bloodied Catholic saints and folk stories peopled with fairies — into an equally mythic cultural landscape among the Inuit of Sanikiluaq where she participates in seal skinning in the blood-soaked skin room and absorbs the story of Sedna, whose severed fingers become the animals of the sea. Twenty-something Teresa, on the other hand, roams St. John's as an art gallery promoter by day and photographer by night. Her world revolves around various artistic friends, her memories of sexual violence in the north, her unrealized sexuality, and her intensely mythical dreamworld. In the face of her father's disappointment and silence about their northern experience, Teresa struggles alone to subdue the partial memories of the north which regularly intrude upon her present reality. Teresa and her father maintain a pact of silence about the past, rendering their relationship stiff and superficial; but, her pact of silence with herself is just as debilitating, if not more so. In both worlds, there is a sense of her reliance for guidance on characters and events from the many books she has read, rather than interactions with friends and family.

Equally important to understanding Teresa and the unravelling of her story of childhood rupture are the two landscapes she inhabits. While her adult body is in St. John's, her mind's primary landscape is the snowy, wind-battered barrens of the northern tundra she experienced as a child. As her physical self moves through the city at a mental remove, she experiences a double exposure of the two landscapes. Her orientation to snow and other forms of whiteness/blankness, her attunement to sounds in the environment, and her persistent dwelling in a landscape she experienced for only one year emphasize the divide between her mental and bodily self. The contrast between the northern community and urban space also situates the reader in two positions at once, an effective means of creating a sense of the disorder of the main character's mental landscape.

This division is further reflected by the use of photography throughout the novel. Teresa attempts to represent her ambivalence toward her body, in particular her near-translucent white skin, through landscape-like photographs of her naked body upon waking from nightmarish dreams of sainthood and dismemberment. She desires to document what happened to her in Sanikiluaq through these photographs which map her veins and body parts. In a sense, Teresa explores her violated self through further violation in a semi-conscious attempt to force an intersection of her two selves through physical self-knowledge. Indeed, it is photography that finally realizes the collision of the two Teresas, when a long-stored, undeveloped film provides Teresa with the catalyst to forgive her childhood self and to begin an intimate, mature relationship with her friend, Mark.

The novel is unflinching in its description of childhood games of group violence and self-violence. Certainly, the narrative traces the lengths to which children will go to achieve group belonging. Tilley traces an exchange of group activities in *Skin Room*. Teresa, for instance, brings to the north her childhood lore of how to

mutually cause two kids to lose consciousness, while her Inuit peers induct her into using a Vicks Inhaler to the eyeball. In addition, muddled sexuality pervades the landscape of childhood, which Tilley explores through the violation of personal boundaries with hickeys and the shock value these carry in the adult world of Teresa's father. Tilley incisively depicts the impending threat of sexual maturation upon the pre-adolescent psyche. The complex relationship between Teresa at age 12 and Willassie at age 17, for example, invokes the tumble of emotions surrounding sexual exploration and an evolving sense of one's self.

Perhaps most provocative is Tilley's depiction of a child's perception of Inuit culture. Tilley makes little attempt to contextualize her knowledge, except for instances when the adult Teresa briefly and intermittently muses about what white people may have done to the cultures of the peoples of the north, and nihilistically comments on the potential effects of the greenhouse effect on northern communities and landscapes. These asides provide little insight into adult experiences in Inuit communities. Cultural norms and beliefs are communicated through the lens of a particularly literate, but inexperienced small girl. It is left to the reader to either accept her first-person perceptions of difference, or challenge such mutations with further learning about the Inuit. In a way, Tilley avoids the controversy of appropriation of voice through such open-endedness. In another way, she runs the risk of recapitulating the newcomer in the north stories of other Euro-Canadian interlopers.

While such problematics face the reader of *Skin Room*, it is an admirable and engaging story. Teresa's characterization is nuanced and thought-provoking. The oscillating voices of the pre-teen Teresa and the twenty-something Teresa are beautifully distinct, yet inseparable. The story does not minimize her victimization in the hands of Willassie, nor does it condemn her complicity. Readers familiar with St. John's will enjoy Tilley's pointed use of common sites and settings, her sardonic and deflating attitude towards touristic heritage enterprises and her surprising and delightful meditations on the art world. This is a profound story of emergence from childhood trauma, and its avoidance of salaciousness, predictability and didacticism make it an engrossing read.

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*Folklore: An Emerging Discipline, Selected Essays of Herbert Halpert.* Edited by Martin Lovelace, Paul Smith, and J.D.A. Widdowson. St John's: Folklore and Language Publications, MUN, 2002, ISBN 0 88901 335 7.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I HAD the pleasure of reviewing Herbert Halpert's and J.D.A. Widdowson's *Folktales of Newfoundland* in this journal (*Newfoundland Studies* 13, 1 [Spring 1997], 93–97) declaring its two volumes to be “the best edition of a regional (or national, for that matter) corpus of folk-narrative that I have come across in almost fifty years of involvement in this field of study.” More recently, I re-