

## Michael Crummey, *Galore*

Cynthia Sugars

Volume 24, Number 2, Fall 2009

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24\\_2rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24_2rv04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

### ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Sugars, C. (2009). Review of [Michael Crummey, *Galore*]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 24(2), 289–294.

volume succeeds is in presenting the capacity of Canada's coastal communities to build resilience and move forward as they face environmental and social-economic uncertainty. Theorists and practitioners concerned about rural restructuring in coastal communities will gain greater understanding of these important issues and will find much use in this volume.

Donna G. Curtis  
University of New Brunswick

Michael Crummey. *Galore*. Doubleday Canada, 2009. 365 pp. CAN \$32.95. ISBN 978-0385663144.

WRITING A REVIEW of Michael Crummey's new novel *Galore* makes me long to be reading it again. It is difficult to do justice to a book that is so spellbinding, so lush and exhilarating and layered that the workaday world comes to a standstill when you immerse yourself in it. Many reviews of this novel will tell you that it is a book rife with folk legend and superstition, which it is. But more profoundly, this is a book about inheritance and memory: cultural, historical, genetic, geographical, mystical. Crummey has stated that he wanted to pack all of Newfoundland into one great bible of a book. He sought to create a compendium of Newfoundland folk stories told in the way his grandparents would have told them. In the course of this book, one is taken on an unfolding transgenerational tour, an epic spectacle that covers such topics as human inheritance, historical encryption, destiny, the unconscious, immortality, apocryphal genealogies, and the fading of remembrance, all of it imbued with the lingering odour of fish. "There's more to the world than what your little mind can swallow," one of the characters tells her doctor/husband towards the end of the book (265). The character might as well be speaking to readers. If this is seduction, well, Michael Crummey has managed it. There is evil, yes, and vengeance, and grief, but more than that there is deep-seated human need and love, belief and error, ignorance and frailty, fatality and a yearning for ancestral presence. "Where do you come from?" is not the question here, but rather, "Whom do you belong to?" Whose blood flows through your veins? ... Whose destiny impinges on yours?

There is a temptation to invoke the "mythic" quality of this book, but the imprecision of the term does the novel a disservice. This book is less the stuff of myth than of legend. In general parlance, it is broadly agreed that a legend is a story that is told as if it has its roots in an historical event and geographical locale. Whether or not the legendary "events" actually did occur is irrelevant; what matters is that the stories are passed down as a tradition as though they had a real foundation in the past (however the facts have been altered in the interim). The transgenerational plotline of *Galore* allows us to witness a legend in the making. We see the catalyzing event, we see people's reactions to it, we watch how it becomes adapted and changed over time, we hear how the story is elaborated upon, how elements are for-

gotten, how belief wavers, and we see, finally, how it resurges unsummoned in the unconscious of a distant descendant, who has an inkling of the trace of something momentous in his genetic makeup, but who cannot plumb its depths ... until the end.

Crummey says that one of the catalyzing events that launched him upon writing this novel was his chance reading of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* during the book tour for his second novel *The Wreckage*. Struck by the familiarity of Marquez's magic realist world, Crummey recognized its similarity to the world of his grandparents in outport Newfoundland. In an interview for Random House, Crummey stated that "The people who became Newfoundlanders — the Irish and West Country English, the Jerseymen, French, Scots and 'Jackie-tars' — occupied more than just a physical space here. Their country existed somewhere between the stark landscape and a nether world of lore and superstition and fear and wonder, each as real as the other. It was that country I was trying to recreate in *Galore*." Crummey is drawn by the lure of the other world, that is certain. The world he conjures in the outport community of Paradise Deep is at once miraculous and mundane, but he's also interested in how the inheritance of these stories plays out in the making of a culture, and how the present becomes infused with significance. His achievement mirrors that of the flawed but life-affirming priest in the novel, who imparts a certainty that "the people on the shore were something more than an inconsequential accident in the world" (143).

Laced through the novel is the thread of the supernatural, yet what contributes to the evocative quality of its effects is that it is funnelled through the line of familial inheritance. This mixture of magic and realism complements the notion of the historical encryption that is at work in legends, a buried story that may be beyond recuperation (as "fact") yet present as a kind of subconscious "memory" (as cultural traditions or stories). Even generations after the main events of the novel, many of the ghosts and stories "occup[y] a dark corner in the dreams of every soul on the shore," unconscious memories that are as "ancient and abiding as the ocean itself" (114). Encryption occurs on the level of genealogy also. Embedded in the genes is some element of inherited ancestral predisposition that is at once tangible and ineffable, a trace or phantom of an ancestral unconscious. One can liken this to a form of "possession," in which the ancestral object is encrypted within the mind of a descendant, operating from within, but without the subject's conscious awareness of it. If this sounds like superstition, well, who's to say that superstition is not on some level a perception of a version of reality, as Crummey hints when he speaks of the in-between world of pre-twentieth century Newfoundland. *Galore* is replete with such enigmas, suggesting that perhaps superstition is an encryption of a forgotten event. Some might speak of this phenomenon as a curse; others might label it destiny. Others still might call it "bad blood". Literally. It may be that genes manifest themselves in not so mysterious ways. The novel leaves the mystery of it all tantalizingly unresolved even as it offers a profound meditation on the contingency of destiny. One thing is certain: the hauntings of this world, and the storied nature

of it connect one with one's ancestors. Genealogy tied to place, embodied in the manifestation of curses and ghosts, renders that place "home."

The story begins when a white whale is washed up on the shores of Paradise Deep, still breathing. The townsfolk, who have had a bad season of fishing, gather around, waiting for the beast to die so that they can carve off a share of the meat. The whale becomes a kind of manna from heaven, the first of many biblical parallels that suffuse this novel. They were in need; God has provided. Or so it appears. As they poke and prod the animal, the different characters in the community come into focus. Jabez Trim, the self-appointed preacher, who ministers to the community with a Bible that has lost some of its pages. King Me Sellers (named after the move in checkers) who rules the community with an iron capitalist fist and tries to claim the whale for himself. Mary Tryphena, the wandering beauty, who sees things others cannot. And the formidable and unforgettable Widow Devine, who marches onto the scene and takes charge. Her sheer and unflinching competence makes her the subject of awe and fear to many in the town, particularly the Sellers patriarch with whom the Devines have a lasting feud (and, not surprisingly, obsession).

When one of the men cuts into the whale's belly and a human form slips out, the people know whom to call. The Widow Devine, who is also the local midwife, catches the body of a man, his skin and hair bleached white. It turns out, of course, that the man is not dead, but because he is taken as an object of revulsion and superstition by the community (in part because he reeks of dead fish), it is left to the Widow to provide a home for him, which she does by fitting him up in the shed beside their house. His identity, however, remains a mystery, and the people of the community are uncertain whether he is a good or ill omen. Even his name is telling of his obscure status.

— He come right out of the whale's belly, James Woundy announced, as if he had been the only one present to see it. — As God is my witness so he did. Just like that one Judas in the Bible.

— Not Judas, you arse.

— James turned to look at Jabez Trim. — Well who was it then, Mr. Trim?

— Jonah, it was. Jonah was swallowed by the whale.

— You sure it weren't Judas, Mr. Trim?

— Judas was the disciple who betrayed Our Lord for thirty pieces of silver.

— And he was thrown overboard, James said. — That's how I minds it. Thrown into the ocean for betraying the Lord....

— Jonah was fleeing the Lord God Almighty, Jabez insisted. — God chose him to be a prophet and Jonah had rather be a sailor and he ran from God aboard of a ship. And he was thrown into the sea by his mates to save themselves from a savage storm the Lord set upon them. And God sent a whale to swallow Jonah.

— That's a fine story, Mr. Trim, James said. — But it don't sound quite right to my memory. (8-9)

As a compromise, the man is christened "Judah," a fusion of Judas and Jonah. And a curious prophet he is. He remains mute until the day he dies, yet he also tests people's integrity and family loyalties.

The elaborate twists and turns of this Newfoundland epic are so wonderfully ornate that it is impossible to give a full sense of the story in a brief review. The arrival of the "Sea Orphan," as Judah is called, coincides with the birth of another child, Lazarus, who is the Widow Devine's grandson and Mary Tryphena's brother. It appears that Lazarus and the "Sea Orphan" share an animating connection. Their fates are intricately entwined: if Judah cannot eat, neither can Lazarus; if Lazarus is ill, so is Judah. As the widow cares for the baby she realizes that "something more oblique and subterranean was at work in the child, something she was helpless to identify or treat" (12). The story echoes those legends of exchanged faerie children who are sent to test the human parents. If they treat the faery child well, no matter how grotesque or vulgar it may be, the safety of their own child is ensured. However, the character of the "faerie" here is less ominous than that. This folktale tradition is beautifully overlaid with a Christian one, in which Judah is also set up as a Christ-like figure whose role is the people's salvation (later in the novel, he calls himself "God's Nephew"). There is nothing didactic about this. Judah himself appears somewhat befuddled by it all. He is a lesser Christ, after all.

And so his fate changes with the times. He goes from being a foul-smelling outcast to becoming one of the most central and well-loved members of the community. Through a curious set of circumstances, he also becomes Mary Tryphena's husband, making him a pivotal intervening branch in the Sellers-Devine family trees. And yet he dies in ignominy, locked in a cell scratching passages from scripture into the walls with a nail. In between, it slowly emerges that Judah brings good luck on the ocean; the boat he rides in returns with a plentiful haul. He forms part of the general mystery and magic that infuses the Devine household. Mary Tryphena may or may not have conjured the great whale in her hunger for knowledge. She watches it ram itself into the harbour "like a nail hammered into a beam of wood" (11). The Widow may or may not have put a curse on King Me Sellers's progeny after he took revenge upon her for having refused his sexual advances. Or it may be that his selfishness creates its own web of bad luck. Neither line is without its faults, and both experience the hurdles that come with unrequited love or, alternatively, love that is requited too recklessly.

So it is that the stuff of legend is entwined with the theme of genealogical inheritance and descent. What do we owe to genetic inheritance and what is brought down upon us by chance? What are the links between predetermination and an ancestral/legendary unconscious? The novel raises the spectre of a genetic unconscious in evocative ways, where traits like solitude or envy might be "a peculiar inheritance of [the] blood" (263) running through the family line like "a list of symptoms" (242). Mary Tryphena, almost despite herself, finds herself reenacting the role of the infamous Widow. Abel, three generations after Lazarus, finds him-

self in a similar state: gasping for life, in need of divine intervention. Judah's son and great-grandson are both burdened by the telltale odour of stinking fish, the latter ending up mute like his progenitor. Esther the raven-haired songstress has the black hair of her Tryphena grandmother, but carries the curse that follows the Sellers clan. In the end, she unknowingly sleeps with her own cousin. By the end of the novel, the Devines and the Sellers have become so interconnected, both via bloodline and communal history, that it is hard to disentangle them. The genealogical line of the book becomes a web of interfamilial connections that play out in surprising yet seemingly predestined ways.

What is most striking is that the world conjured in this novel doesn't feel forced or outlandish. It feels like home ... or is it family? It pulls us into its logic, as though we, too, for the brief time of reading the book, can suspend our disbelief ... or indulge our superstition. Crummey manages the balance deftly, treading a fine line between cramming his story with exotic lore and staying within the realm of possibility (a difficult idea even to verbalize in this context since who's to say the supernatural is not possible ... which is ultimately the point). This ambiguity is echoed in the very story of Judah himself, which over the years is transformed and revised so that it is unclear what the originating event really was: "It seemed more likely the story of the whale was born from Jude's strangeness than the other way round. Even people who had witnessed the events began downplaying the evidence of their senses, and each season saw Judah's status dwindle slightly in the minds of fishermen who preferred to think their success the result of their own cunning and skill and hard work" (51). And yet ... there remains the material trace of the whale bones "bleaching white among the beach grass" (79).

Towards the end of the novel, when one of the characters is on her deathbed and is offered a way out by her doctor, she responds with the phrase "Now the once." The doctor, who is from the United States, muses on the phrase: "It was the oddest expression he'd learned on the shore. Now the once. The present twined with the past to mean soon, a bit later, some unspecified point in the future. As if it was all the same finally, as if time was a single moment endlessly circling on itself" (326). This is the effect of this wonderfully evocative novel: as though the "now" had been present once before and yet is nevertheless singular unto itself, pointing in a line towards futurity. Not in the sense of repetition or futility, but in the sense of redemption, connection, destiny. The appearance of Judah, we are led to believe, is not accidental ... though that may be the stuff of legend. He lingers in his descendants' genes, in the community's stories. Is this a story of the second coming layered within a world of Newfoundland folklore and legend? Maybe. Or is it a form of mystical recurrence, stories that bind the community by rehearsing its connection to both the nether world of the spirits and that other nether world, the ancestral past? We are only ourselves to the extent that we are works of bricolage, a mystical fusion of geographical determinism, genetic inheritance, and cultural-historical transmission. One thing is certain: there is no escaping the past, or its

ghosts. You may as well invite them in, set them up in the shed out back, and pray for a good harvest.

Cynthia Sugars  
University of Ottawa