

Michael Winter. *Minister Without Portfolio*

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“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” It is disappointing to see a writer returning to the same well using the same leaky bucket.

Readers for whom *The Son of a Certain Woman* is a return to St. Johnston’s, Oldlostland, may find this visit somewhat less satisfying than previous trips. Percy Joyce is a compelling, complex character and though his perspective is different, he is showing readers many of the same sites they have already seen through the eyes of Bobby O’Malley, Draper Doyle Ryan, Joe Smallwood, Sheilagh Fielding, and others. Johnston’s unwavering portrayal of the unconventional love and sexuality between Percy and his mother is commendable — all the more so because Johnston makes it understandable. What is less commendable is having these characters plod through plots and places already too familiar to visitors of St. Johnston’s.

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Michael Winter. *Minister Without Portfolio*. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton Canada, 2013. ISBN 978-0-670-06715-2

For admirers of Michael Winter, his most recent novel, *Minister Without Portfolio*, will initially appear to be exploring some familiar ideas. The novel chronicles the maturation of Henry Hayward, a young man whose girlfriend abruptly ends their romance and leaves him spiritually and physically adrift. Hayward is a wayward soul, whose solution to his heartbreak is to “join an army-affiliated contracting crew that takes him to Afghanistan” (jacket flap). The attempt at self-escape goes terribly wrong when Henry and his friends are ambushed by a suicide bomber. Traumatized by the explosion and burdened by the guilty

realization that he is complicit in the death of his friend, Henry begins to dig deeper, and the novel enters recognizably modernist territory as the hero confronts his own unstable identity and longs for a more secure community.

Like Winter's other fictions, Henry's journey towards self-knowledge unfolds in a series of crisply drawn scenes. Winter's style is sparse and direct and the dialogue is particularly fresh and economical. As his journey progresses Henry emerges as a fully realized character, while even more entertaining are the host of lesser figures who surround him, playing small but memorable parts in the drama of his self-renewal. The setting of *Minister Without Portfolio* also feels familiar to readers of Winter's *All This Happened* (2000) when Henry undertakes his search for identity in a small rural community in Newfoundland on the edge of the larger urban world. The novel carefully attends to the decline of the fisheries, the shift away from outport culture, and the difficulties experienced by those who live on the economic margins; thus, the text explores the cultural shifts in the regional hinterlands. The town, appropriately named Renew, is "an old place . . . built on the mouth of a river with wharves and fishing stages that allowed quick access to the sea" (159). With an engaging ability to make his fiction self-aware, Winter chronicles Henry's renovation of an old, abandoned home at the edge of the village and in a self-consciously symbolic fashion restores both it and himself.

If some of these elements seem familiar to Winter's audience, there are a number of techniques in this text that work especially well and help make *Minister Without Portfolio* a fresh, compelling novel. First of all, Winter shifts away from the first-person voice he has employed elsewhere and his use of third-person narration is impressive. Modifying the conventional stability afforded by an external narrator, Winter sometimes uses his third-person voice to come close to the intimate inner life of his hero and then suddenly shifts and observes his hero at a distance, which preserves the enigmatic sense of his complex character. When Henry accidentally falls into an incinerator, Winter draws close to him and captures the inner terror of the moment — "Life turned white and knew he would land in a vat of burning oil" (220) — and then he pulls far away from Henry to convey the sense of trauma he exhibits when rescued: "A shape running around the perimeter . . . the man who fell in . . . ran over the dozered fill and kept running until the shoes fell off him . . . and he staggered into the trees as if hiding there" (224). Winter's ability to shift and control his perspective is subtle and effective. He also has a fine ability to be self-consciously literary, without being cloyingly artificial. For example, several of Henry's friends make reference to him as a "minister without portfolio," a

man who is “not committed to anything, but you got a hand in everywhere” (33); although such explicit references to theme could sometimes seem strained, Winter pulls it off. The novel’s style is open and accessible without becoming mundane.

What is most refreshing, however, is the author’s unapologetic use of the forms of the Romance. Usually lauded as a realist writer, Winter writes *Minister Without Portfolio* as a quest narrative. The soldier-hero, war-weary and traumatized, returns to his home village and attempts to find himself, create his own identity, and secure the community he comes to love. Employing the mythic tropes that anchor the Romance form, Henry becomes a searcher. His character is refined by a series of crises, and, as he gets to know the “community of a hundred” who are his to protect, the mythic overtones build. Henry’s experience in the incinerator and in a forest fire echo a descent into an underworld, and his final willingness to confront Rick, the powerful businessman/king who controls local events, marks his willingness to step up as a fully responsible saviour of the community. The mythic tropes of the Romance are employed, but Winter simultaneously plays with these patterns and subverts them. The novel explores Henry’s search for his true role, but Winter’s exploration of masculinity does not become a conventional endorsement of the patriarchal. Henry may be trying to find himself, but so are the women in the story and they are more likely than he to adopt conventional leadership roles: “Silvia said . . . it’s made me realize I’m the man and he’s the woman.” Winter’s point, both formal and thematic, is that many people in the contemporary world are questing, and this novel is about a wider renewal and rebirth. Whether it is Henry’s desire to “resurrect the garden” (195) or his and Martha’s attempt to restore the old house before her child is born, the members of the community as a whole are empowered to find their own paths to security, freedom, and love. For all his moments of self-aware postmodernity and modernist angst, Winter ultimately delivers an old-fashioned story in a convincingly fresh way. The old house gets moved to a new lot, but the old structure still stands secure.

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