

Edward Riche. *Today I Learned It Was You*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2016. ISBN 978-1-48700-057-8

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Edward Riche. *Today I Learned It Was You*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2016. ISBN 978-1-48700-057-8

There is much to praise in Edward Riche's *Today I Learned It Was You*, but perhaps the novel's singular achievement is capturing on the page, precisely and perfectly, exactly what Newfoundlanders mean when they say "Wha?" The actors and the actions of the novel revolve around Matt Olford, St. John's mayor and retired fringe NHLer who literally had a brush with Greatness as a called-up bit player on Wayne Gretzky's 1987 Stanley Cup-winning Edmonton Oilers. Riche's fictionalization of the St. John's city council over which Matt presides in the narrative present of 2013 is as calamitous and cacophonous a crew of the perpetually bored and the eternally stunned as has ever been put to page. And Councillor Wally O'Neill is the most hapless of the lot. It is he who utters often the dismissive, not-at-all-inquisitive "Wha?" throughout the narrative: as he does when being informed by several of his fellow councillors that PCP and PCB are not interchangeable terms, or when Councillor Alessandra Cappello claims that gratuitous signage in a city park "limits experience," or when she uses the word "gastronomy," or when Matt has to explain to him that more downtown parking spaces may not necessarily be good for St. John's. Riche does well to capture the mingling of self-righteousness and ignorance contained within the phrase—an expression that is simultaneously a confession that one does not understand what is being discussed and a dismissal of the topic as not worth knowing. The uselessness of the topic under discussion is only further affirmed by one's ignorance of it; and the unworthiness of one's conversation partner is likewise further affirmed by his or her expertise on said useless topic. Rather than try to better understand Matt's point on parking maximums, Wally emits a perplexed "Wha?" then "stared at Matt for a moment and then shook his head, pitying Matt's lack of understanding." As an exasperated Alessandra observes: "It wasn't merely Wally's ignorance; it was that he wore it as a badge of honour."

It is important for Riche to capture with such veracity the nuances,

ticks, and tendencies of St. John's life, rhythm, and language, for the events of the novel may be otherwise too foolish to inspire any reader to suspend disbelief. The happening that brings all of the characters into Matt's orbit is the reported "transitioning" from a man to a deer of one Harry Davenant. The unemployed actor discovers to his dismay there is little work for the culture producer, or even the culture curator, in oil-mad, ore-mad Newfoundland (in Riche's St. John's, the LSPU Theatre has been shut down, with no member of the arts community stepping forth to champion it, and is being considered seriously as "an ideal location for the Newfoundland and Labrador Sports Hall of Fame"), so, following a "perfunctory interview," Harry becomes a security guard patrolling the streets and parks of St. John's. Just six days on the job, Harry is set upon by a pack of teenaged, "pasty-faced" "skeets" who have just vandalized the Great War Memorial and the statue of Peter Pan in Bowring Park. Following the attack, Harry goes feral, and begins what appears to some to be a cervine existence of living and foraging in the park. As his professed supporters put it when petitioning the mayor to help Harry become "the deer that was always in him": "He's harming no one out there. He spooks easily, so scarcely anyone has even noticed him. He's disappeared in the trees before they can get a good look at him."

In a pattern that will be familiar to anyone who has read Riche's other works (especially *Rare Birds* and *The Nine Planets*), Harry's cause is taken up, not altogether altruistically, by "friends" who seem interested more in helping themselves than supporting Harry. Lloyd Purcell, burned-out scriptwriter who drank, smoked, and snorted himself out of a life of high-end Hollywood company and Southern California heat, exploits Harry's breakdown to create a social media movement, plying his trade to create a bogus Facebook page: "Lloyd scanned the computer screen. An 'event'? It would be, he hoped. More a 'spectacle' if all went according to plan. 'Cause or Community.' There it was: 'Cause.' Harry Davenant was going to be a 'cause.'" Natalie Sommerville, who declares herself to be one of "Mr. Davenant's many, many friends. Dear friends," despite never having met

the man (or deer), is desperate for the self-reification that will come from attaching herself to any cause, having moved “to St. John’s to organize local protests against the seal hunt, only to discover that the taking of the baby white coats had ceased many years earlier and that the remaining hunt, for older animals, was negligible.” In Harry Davenant, a performer who becomes the performance of nature, Riche has produced a précis of the Newfoundland environment and art and tradition lauded by locals and lapped up by tourists, so it is no surprise his transformation is co-opted quickly and promoted fiercely by culture vultures desperate to claim this cash cow (cash stag?) as their own.

Riche peoples his novel with similar scam artists, shysters, and sleeveens all on the make and all frantic to exploit some aspect of Newfoundland life and landscape. As a Newfoundlander with a common touch and a Stanley Cup ring, Matt is pursued by businesses and the federal Conservative Party. Alessandra’s husband is a university professor who, before his slide into dementia, was one of several contesting to be the authoritative voice in “Cabot studies.” Wally O’Neill is trying to sell the “O’Neill Evacuation System Module” to a local offshore oil company. A local park will be saved only if a Newfoundland entrepreneur and purveyor of Newfoundland’s response to Red Bull is permitted to name the place “Jerjuice Park” and post the drink’s logo on all park signage. Culture is an overcrowded battleground in Riche’s St. Johns, and one needs to be always performing one’s authenticity lest he lose his place or be called out as something less than genuine, as is Lloyd by an intoxicated Wally holding forth in Fiddler’s, a pub festooned with “Newfoundland bric-a-brac” presented “without governing principle”: “Look at buddy, luh, mainlander. . . . Are you a mainlander? . . . You looks like a mainlander. . . . Go back to Toronto out of it!” Lloyd deems it necessary to perform his Newfoundlandness and walks across the bar to inform Wally, “I’m a Notre Dame bayman. So go fuck yourself.”

Riche makes connections between *Today I Learned It Was You* and most of his earlier works, including *The Great Eastern*, a faux

production of the faux Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland. The result is a level of world creation usually seen only in science fiction or fantasy novels. Lloyd is brother of Dave Purcell, the protagonist and producer of another pseudo-event in *Rare Birds*. Gerald Hayden, the founder of Hayden Offshore, to whom Wally does not get to pitch his evacuation module, is the unrepentant industrialist of *The Nine Planets*. Meredith Devereux, the widowed sister-in-law of that novel's protagonist, is revealed in this novel to be the acting director of St. John's Parks and Recreation. The effect of this intermingling is not a notion of an expanding universe but rather the claustrophobia of an imploding star (as one soon-to-be philanderer expresses to his paramour who has just demanded he take them "somewhere": "Where! . . . Where in this village can I possibly take us?"). With so many of these characters driven by the existential panic of being pushed out of this congested and contested space, any approach to Newfoundland culture, identity, nature, or industry seems more an act of self-preservation than social conservation. As transplanted Toronto police officer Gary Mackenzie observes, Newfoundlanders are "inordinately pleased with themselves. They looked inward and uncritically loved all they observed; the views the fish the berries the mountains the music." Yet this love extends only to those things that flatter and solidify themselves. There is here the tinge or taint of Wally's self-sustaining, xenophobic "Wha?": songs, stories, landscapes, and people have value only insofar as they can be used.

It could be argued that the touted, produced, and reproduced culture and tradition of Newfoundland and Labrador have gone beyond artifice so that the performance has become the actual. One need look only at the various depictions of Newfoundland in "reality" television programs for evidence of this slippage between signifier and signified. The eponymous proposed hotel of Majumder Manor will never be built — the performance of the struggle to build it is the only actual article. "Cold Water Cowboys" is not about watching fishers make their living — the show itself is the job and the end product. After all, no one expects "The Bachelor" or "The Bachelorette" to result in an