Newfoundland Studies

Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs. Patrick O'Flaherty.

Wayne Johnston

Volume 4, numéro 2, fall 1988

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_2br05

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Johnston, W. (1988). Compte rendu de [*Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs*. Patrick O'Flaherty.] *Newfoundland Studies*, *4*(2), 213–215.

Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs. Patrick O'Flaherty. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1987. 63 p. $9.95

WAYNE JOHNSTON

THE ART OF THE kind of short story attempted by Patrick O'Flaherty in this collection is compression. It is through a compression of meaning much like that which occurs in the lyric poem that this kind of short story — what one might call the "short" short story — achieves its effect. The writer seeks to convey, through a single incident or brief description, something essential to life. A common fault of writers new to this short story form is to mistake abbreviation for compression. That is, in trying for a kind of poetic suggestiveness, unpracticed writers achieve instead incompleteness. It often seems, in fact, that whole passages are missing from their stories. Sometimes, usually at crucial points in the stories, there can be failures of language. Many of the stories in Patrick O'Flaherty's *Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs* have these faults. Halfway through the title story, for instance, we have the protagonist reacting to his brother's death-wish with "shock and dismay." The reason the story lapses into cliche at this point is that the author himself has no clear notion of why the protagonist's brother wants to die. The story hinges on the protagonist's understanding of his brother's suicide, and yet that understanding is not conveyed — at least not convincingly.

"Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs," like many of the stories in this collection, shows a man going through some sort of mid-life crisis. The unnamed protagonist has arrived at the middle of his life and found it empty. He senses that this emptiness derives in part from his betrayal of his brother years ago, and he retreats to his summer cabin to try to come to terms with this betrayal. While there, he gets a glimpse of the rare "Greater Yellowlegs," a bird intended to symbolize the dead brother, or, more to the point, the spirit of forgiveness and regeneration. The protagonist's betrayal of his brother, which we are to believe has haunted the protagonist, is that, at age fifteen, when his brother was being abused by Christian Brothers, he "kept his distance." We are next asked to believe that, as a result of being bullied by the Brothers, the protagonist's rebellious brother loses his will to live and,

a few years later, commits suicide. There is hardly more detail than this in the story itself. Quite simply, the crucial heart of the story is missing. We need to know much more before we can believe or care that these things happened, and before the central symbol of the Greater Yellowlegs can be convincing. The stories "Leaving Anna," "An Episode in Middle Life," and "Tokens" all deal with men in mid-life crises, and all fall short of their mark in just the way that "Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs" falls short of its mark.

Four other stories, "A Friend to Man," "Mother Ireland," "Now For the Dance," and "Fish Killer," can be grouped together because each is designed, not to convey an impression of life, but to argue a point. In writing each story, O'Flaherty had a particular opponent in mind, a particular cause to uphold, or some much beleaguered underdog to defend. In "A Friend to Man," his targets are the more fanatic feminists, his underdog the all too often unfairly criticized housewife. The point of "A Friend to Man" seems to be that a woman can be a "friend to man," that is, look after men, without sacrificing her individuality or dignity. In "Mother Ireland", the target is those who would romanticize the mother country, be it Ireland, England, etc. In "Fish Killer," the target is the seal hunt protestors, or, more generally, anyone who claims that Newfoundlanders, and Newfoundland fishermen especially, are savages. "Fish Killer" shows a supposedly representative Newfoundland fisherman freeing a trapped dolphin. In "Now For the Dance," the target is the "artsie fartsies," especially those who sit on Canada Council committees and argue that the ballet and the symphony orchestra are more important than folk groups. These four stories are the least successful stories in the collection. They read like one-sided arguments and inevitably descend to the level of the groups they seek to criticize.

In two stories, "352 Pennywell" and "Exchange of Body Fluids," O'Flaherty takes a look at what might be called the urban average man and woman respectively. In the first story, a political campaign worker who fancies himself a future federal cabinet minister is shown going door to door. A certain pathos is achieved by the contrast between J.J. O'Grady's fantasy life and the grubbiness of his real life, even if neither life, as presented, is fully convincing. If the tone of "352 Pennywell" is faintly patronizing, that of "Exchange of Body Fluids" is much more so, a fact that will be evident to any reader. In trying too self-consciously to avoid one kind of sexism, the author has gone headlong into another. This portrait of a young woman's sex life is not designed to titillate. It is a look at the gritty reality of sex, a reality that only true love can overcome. But sex was never so gritty or so "real" as it is in this story. Every conceivable object of revulsion is dragged in—defecation, perspiration, bad breath, spit, vomit, acne, AIDS. Kimberly Manning is ninety per cent preoccupied with hygiene and ten per cent with sex.

Only in the story "The Prophet" does O'Flaherty have control of a theme.

This story, unlike the others, is not overly ambitious, nor does it state its theme too boldly. The hero, unfortunately named Lew Costello, is a university professor and a card carrying Liberal. He travels to Marystown to address the graduating class at the vocational school. Nothing much happens in the story. The effect derives from the contrast between Costello's genuine attempts to communicate his love of Newfoundland and the casual indifference of his audience. The story succeeds because Costello's love of Newfoundland is shown to be uncertain and plagued with doubt, and is therefore convincing. The difference between Costello and his audience is not so much that he loves Newfoundland and they do not as that, while he fights to keep alive in himself a love of homeland, they are not even aware that they have lost it.

"The Prophet", and a certain charm and manner of language in all these stories make one think that O'Flaherty may one day write good fiction. *Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs* tries too self-consciously to avoid mistakes, thereby making far too many. It tries, as is often the case with first books, to do everything at once. But Patrick O'Flaherty has going for him what these days is very rare: he unashamedly loves the people he writes about.

ST. JOHN'S