

## Jonathan Butler, *Return of the Native*

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## REVIEWS

Jonathan Butler, *Return of the Native*, St. John's, Breakwater, 2007, ISBN 978-1-55081-230-5.

OVER THE PAST DECADE OR SO, St. John's has become one of Canadian literature's most compelling urban settings. Writers such as Michael Winter, Paul Bowdring, Lisa Moore, and others have provided detailed portraits of contemporary St. John's, and in the process have challenged and complicated stereotypical and nostalgic images of a Newfoundland defined by outports and the fishery, a society locked in the past. Jonathan Butler's *Return of the Native* is in the tradition of recent Newfoundland fiction, and is firmly rooted in the streets and alleys of St. John's. An entertaining, often funny, but flawed first novel, *Return of the Native* provides an engaging portrait of downtown St. John's, mixed with thoughtful meditations on identity and belonging and the state of contemporary Newfoundland. Yet, as a novel it is ultimately underdeveloped and aimless.

As is the case with many first novels, it is difficult not to see the author in the protagonist, who embodies many of the strengths and weaknesses of the novel. Butler, a native of St. John's, received a PhD in English from the University of Toronto and is currently a professor of English at a Taiwanese university. The protagonist, Udo Nomi, is also "a purebred Newfoundlander through and through" (9). He is an academic who went to the mainland for his doctoral studies at the University of Toronto and stayed at U of T as a professor. Disenchanted and alienated, he, however, has given up his academic career, left behind his big-city life in Toronto, and returned to St. John's. At times, Udo comes across as more of a mouthpiece for Butler's thoughts on academia, identity, and place than as a fully realized character.

He may be a purebred Newfoundlander through and through, but, as his name suggests, Udo is not a typical Newfoundlander, as his father was an African-American originally from the southern United States. The impact of race on Udo's identity is a central focus of the novel, and through the introduction of an Afro-Newfoundlander protagonist like Udo, *Return of the Native* not only challenges assumptions about the homogeneity of Newfoundland culture, but enables a more complex and nuanced, if only partially realized, discussion of Newfoundland identity.

Udo left Newfoundland for graduate studies in Toronto, largely to “get in touch with his African-American roots,” in part by studying with a leading black theorist. In Toronto, Udo associates with the local black community, but rather than finding a home within it, he feels alienated from it and homesick for Newfoundland. His experience in Toronto confirms for him that identity is defined not by skin colour but by place. So, as the novel begins, he has returned home to St. John’s to reclaim his Newfoundland identity and reconnect with a place that he can comfortably call home.

The plot, such as it is, revolves around Udo’s drinking exploits with Sid Fizzard, a well-known poet and Newfoundland separatist. Together, they spend much of their time in bars on George Street, chatting up women, and plotting Newfoundland’s independence. Udo, in fact, takes a key role in a far-fetched scheme designed to force the other premiers to accept demands that Newfoundland’s relationship with the rest of Canada be realigned and that the historical injustice of Confederation be rectified. To prepare for his role, Udo is given a stack of books to read, primarily Newfoundland fiction, which he has largely neglected in the past. In particular, the novel engages in a dialogue with Wayne Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, as Udo learns about the historical license that best-selling novel took in its portrayal of Joey Smallwood and Confederation. Contrary to what the back-cover blurb suggests, however, the novel does not engage with historical scholarship or historical fiction in any meaningful way.

When he’s not drinking, talking, or reading, Udo spends his time walking around downtown St. John’s, as the novel provides us with a number of detailed and very precise descriptions of his walks. Udo’s journeys can be easily mapped, and readers familiar with St. John’s (particularly those no longer living there) will enjoy having their memories jogged when the novel mentions a familiar bar, store, restaurant, or location. Yet, what Butler’s description of St. John’s achieves in precise detail, it lacks in evocative atmosphere or meaningful engagement with place. I doubt that a reader unfamiliar with St. John’s urban landscape will come away from this novel with much of a sense of place, or a clear sense of its importance to Udo and his fellow inhabitants of St. John’s.

As the novel’s title and premise might suggest, this is a novel of return, and, as the reader might expect, it pays some attention to the transformation of St. John’s during the 15 years that Udo was away. The St. John’s to which Udo has returned is a city awash in oil money and cocaine. Contradictorily, the new-found wealth simultaneously allows Sid Fizzard’s dream of independence to seem viable at the same time as it renders the decadent and pleasure-seeking elites unwilling to challenge the status quo. Unfortunately, however, as with many aspects of this novel, this theme is underdeveloped.

Ultimately, then, *Return of the Native* is a novel of missed opportunities. A short novel, 150 pages, it features a potentially interesting protagonist, and raises interesting and important issues of race, place, identity, belonging, and home, and

presents an engaging and detailed portrait of a fascinating city. Yet, it never really convincingly realizes the potential of any of these elements; part of the problem may be that it simply takes on too much in too few pages. That said, it is often quite witty and engaging, with a number of humorous incidents, and is never less than readable. If Butler can build on the strengths of this novel, then his future novels could be quite memorable. Although not a success, *Return of the Native* demonstrates that Butler is a voice with the potential to contribute much to Newfoundland writing.

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Randall Maggs. *Night Work: The Sawchuk Poems*. London, ON: Brick Books, 2008, ISBN 978-1-894078-62-7.

19 FEBRUARY 2008 WAS one of my best days as a sports fan. That afternoon I watched my beloved Liverpool, who up to that point had been having a rather mediocre season, score two late and improbable goals to upset undefeated Inter Milan in the first game of the Champions League quarter finals. Later that evening, I watched my other love, the Montreal Canadiens, score *six* late and improbable goals to rally from a 5-0 deficit to defeat the New York Rangers 6-5 in a shootout. In between these games, I attended the launch of Randall Maggs' *Night Work: The Sawchuk Poems* at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto. It was like no other book launch I have ever attended. The Ship Pub and Corner Brook's Casual Jack's have their charm, but it certainly was something to watch Maggs discuss his poetry in front of the sparkling Stanley Cup and the images of NHL Hall of Famers (a curator later informed me that the Cup on display was a replica, but I had already had my moment).

If I may talk first a little about aesthetics, Maggs' book is beautifully packaged. The cover sports the poet's subject in the near twilight of his career as a Toronto Maple Leaf. Sawchuk's mask is on the crown of his downturned head, turning the goaltender into a modern day Janus, the two faces alluding to the many facets of one of hockey's most fabled and tragic characters. A faded "1967" runs down the left side of the front cover, a date any Leafs fan (or anyone who has had to listen to a Leafs fan) can tell you is the last time the team won the Stanley Cup. That date signifies both victory and defeat: the triumph over the highly favoured and much younger Montreal Canadiens, and the accumulating shame of every passing year this team fails to repeat that victory. The text is illustrated throughout with some excellent photographs of Sawchuk at all stages of his career. There is a picture of Sawchuk and Johnny Bower after winning the Cup that I am sure my father would love to enlarge and hang in his den. Those who bought the book at the launch were also given hockey cards detailing the "stats" of both Maggs and Sawchuk (Maggs, it is noted, shoots left but writes right).