

Michael Winter, *The Death of Donna Whalen*.

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Volume 26, numéro 1, spring 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26_1rv04

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wyle, H. (2011). Compte rendu de [Michael Winter, *The Death of Donna Whalen*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 26(1), 127–129.

forced into the plot, along with discrepancies in detailing other cultures and histories, results in a somewhat underdeveloped plot about European reconciliation.

Notes

¹Olive Patricia Dickason with David T. McNab, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52, 63-64.

²Ingeborg Marshall, *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 263.

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Michael Winter, *The Death of Donna Whalen*. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton Canada, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-670-0663-6.

EARLIER IN HIS CAREER, Michael Winter frequently ran into trouble over the autobiographical quality of his fiction, which was filled with thinly veiled portraits of incidents involving family and friends. As Winter has mentioned in a number of interviews, those around him became acutely aware of, and sometimes strenuously objected to, his professional eavesdropping. Well, it seems that old habits die hard, because Winter's latest novel, *The Death of Donna Whalen*, while taking a turn towards the documentary, is in some ways an extended exercise in eavesdropping (for much of the book, quite literally). The novel, which was shortlisted for the Rogers Writers Trust Fiction Prize, revisits the murder of a young woman in St. John's in the 1990s and consists of statements by and conversations between those involved in the case, including wiretaps of various witnesses and suspects. In his foreword to the novel, Winter describes his initial temptation to write about the murder in the documentary fiction mode of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, but admits that he developed reservations about taking a true story, especially a graphically violent one that had a dramatic impact on so many lives, and capitalizing on "someone's tragedy for personal gain." After he shelved all his research, however, the voices from the case kept calling to him and ultimately convinced him that the story offered "a wedge into the human condition that was truer and more vivid than what I could fabricate." The result: *The Death of Donna Whalen: A Novel*.

Because Winter respectfully turns the telling of the story over to those who were involved in the murder and the subsequent trial, the question of how this is a *novel* is a good one, and it doesn't entirely go away. Winter has, though, adapted the raw material of the case in a number of significant ways. The segments of narration and dialogue that constitute the novel have been selected from a much larger body

of documents. Winter has “changed the names and locations and merged similar characters,” and perhaps most importantly he has “dramatized scenes by converting testimony into the third person.” Winter also imparts to the novel a certain narrative arc by dividing his tapestry of voices into four main sections reflecting the evolution of the case. Referring in his foreword to William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*, Winter contends that the case was so riveting because of the variety and subjectivity — even unreliability — of the multitude of voices offering perspectives on what happened: suspects, witnesses, police inspectors, forensic experts, lawyers, the victim’s daughter, and even the victim herself. Indeed, much of the allure of the novel resides in the richness of the personalities involved and the theatricality of the documentary form: that is, we absorb the complexity of the situation and the complexity of the personalities by what they say, what they say of themselves, and what they say of each other. Furthermore, what they say is couched in a lively and often coarse Newfoundland idiom that, while superficially uniform, is cut through with differences of class, age, professional authority, and other factors.

The first section, “Family and Neighbours,” introduces the ensemble cast of victims, witnesses, and suspects, in all their uneasy intimacy, at the centre of which is the turbulent relationship between Donna Whalen and her explosive boyfriend, Sheldon Troke. “The Murder” conveys the web of conflicting and often contradictory testimony about events on the night Donna Whalen was found stabbed to death, with a pair of panties twisted around her neck. Despite the dramatic nature of the situation, the story at first is not as gripping as it might sound, because the testimony is at times repetitive and is conveyed without much sense of temporal location beyond the division of the novel into sections. Here an apt comparison is with George Elliott Clarke’s *George & Rue*, a novel about the brutal killing of a taxi driver in Fredericton in 1949, the latter half of which likewise relies heavily on trial transcripts but is conveyed in a less polyphonic mode and with a clearer narrative arc. As *The Death of Donna Whalen* moves towards a verdict, however, the novel becomes more absorbing, intense, and complicated. “The Investigation” chronicles the aggressive approach of the police in pursuing the case against Sheldon Troke and their compromising characterization of the Troke family as a threat to public safety. Winter then effectively builds the climax of the novel, “The Jailhouse Informant,” around the flamboyant, theatrical, and highly dubious Leander Dollymont. Winter decided to take a hands-off approach to the novel, in part because he felt he couldn’t improve on the vividness of the language of the documents and the personalities involved, and in “Dolly,” whose testimony played a big role in the case against Sheldon Troke, Winter clearly recognized a real “character.”

While Winter hovers on the periphery for most of the story, he ends the book with an epilogue imparting the outcome of the case and reflecting on its implications. *The Death of Donna Whalen* is a story about the very human complexities that influence how justice unfolds, and Winter’s documentary approach allows for

its unfolding without prejudgement, forcing us to assess the evidence and adjudicate the conflicting, even self-contradictory, voices as we go. Winter thus avoids predetermining the outcome and, more importantly, offers insight into how the pursuit of justice is complicated by fear, prior reputation, presupposition of guilt, self-protection, and the sometimes understandable, sometimes overzealous concern of authorities to protect the community from further harm.

For those familiar with Winter's work, this is a very different Michael Winter book, and readers looking for his trademark style — the supple lines, the offbeat characters, the vivid, idiosyncratic imagery — are going to be somewhat (but not entirely) disappointed. But like Winter's faux memoir *This All Happened*, and like his innovative variation on the historical novel, *The Big Why, The Death of Donna Whalen* shows Winter to be a writer willing to take some interesting risks, once again rewarding his readers as a result.

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Gerard Collins, *Moonlight Sketches*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-897174-70-8.

THE POPULAR IMAGE of rural Newfoundland is one of idyllic scenes of dories and docks, lobster pots and sunsets, saltbox houses and plaid-and-oilskin-clad locals with faces weathered by the wind and sun. This is the Newfoundland of tourism ads: the one that makes outsiders, worn out with the anonymity and bustle of urban life, gasp and sigh and long for the peace and quiet of a rural village. Those who hold this vision of outport life in their minds will be quickly disabused of it should they pick up a copy of Gerard Collins's short story collection, *Moonlight Sketches*, but pick it up they should. Collins's stories, while predominantly bleak, portray an immensely realistic rural Newfoundland brimming with fascinating and diverse characters and situations. Moments of dark humour and suspense make this collection an enjoyable and worthwhile read — if sometimes uncomfortable — whether or not Collins's fictional setting of the outport of Darwin is one that readers recognize as familiar.

The greatest strength of Collins's writing is his ability to imagine the inner thoughts of the most varied characters. Characters reappear in different stories, and minor characters in some become narrators of others. The highlights of the collection include "Tar Cat," "Exit the Warrior," and "The Sign," all narrated by the same character in various stages of life from child to teenager to adult. In "Tar Cat," David is a sensitive boy who feels powerless amongst his boorishly insensitive family members, including his cousin Benny, who tortures and kills animals as a disturbingly automatic and unfeeling compulsion. Benny's carnage is not unique, however; a fierce pragmatism and absence of sentimentality dominates the entire