

The Fiction of Kent Thompson

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Immediately evident in Kent Thompson's fiction, some three novels and numerous short stories, is its distinct setting, almost without exception the city of Fredericton, where he has taught English and Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick since 1966. Indeed, Fredericton appears in such minute and realistic detail that it becomes Thompson's Yoknapatawpha County, a guide to his imagination. Confined to this small town, his characters inevitably tour its downtown business district, passing, from one end of Queen Street, Simpsons-Sears and The Gaiety Men's Shop, or from the other, The Playhouse and the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel, before stopping for coffee at the Paradise Gardens Restaurant. Frequently, they cross over to King Street and shop at Zellers (one familiar with the area can readily visualize their steps), or, on Saturday mornings, visit the Farmer's Market on George Street, just as citizens of Fredericton have been doing for generations. Circumscribed in part by the Trans-Canada Highway, in part by the Saint John River, Fredericton provides so clear a focus that it often endows Thompson's work with a pleasing verisimilitude.

While Thompson's characters are New Brunswickers, wisely, he never attempts to make them "typical" New Brunswickers; there are no Saint John Loyalists or Acadian fishermen. Yet, if mainly in incidental ways, his characters clearly reflect the culture of the region. They look south to New England and east to Montreal, where "all the *chic* fashions"¹ come from. They buy at Irving Stations and read the *Telegraph-Journal*, and they have friends, as everyone in Atlantic Canada does, who have moved to Calgary or Toronto for work. Also, they worry about the influx of foreign university professors (an especial concern a few years ago) and fear the effects of industrial pollution from eastern U.S. and "Upper-Canadian" cities. In short, they tend to view the world from a regional perspective, as, for instance, does the narrator in a story entitled "Professor Kingblatts' Prediction": ". . . after school I go looking for Hubert Harvey. He is pushing dirt into the river up by the hospital where someday they may build a bridge, but not until just before the next election, and not until the province of New Brunswick can bribe Ottawa with its poverty once again. 'It ain't fair,' we jeer. And it ain't. And Ottawa hates our guts for being poor and angry while gentle Ontario is so reasonable and rich."²

At times Thompson's work, or at least his earlier work, is self-consciously Canadian—which is not surprising, given that the author emigrated to Canada from the United States at the age of thirty. One story, the autobiographical "I Live in Canada," dramatizes his fears and doubts upon adopting Canadian citizenship. Its symbolic central episode is a hunting trip, where the narrator, fearing himself lost in the forest as evening approaches, finally emerges to announce that, after all, "it was a good day."³ "What Costume Shall the New Man Wear" is a kind of personal

¹Kent Thompson, "Longing," in *A Local Hanging and Other Stories* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead Poetry Books and Goose Lane Editions, 1984), p. 139.

²In *Kaleidoscope*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972), p. 8.

³In Kent Thompson, *Shotgun and Other Stories*, (Fredericton: New Brunswick Chapbooks, 1979), p. 26. Hereafter referred to as *Shotgun*.

allegory, with the "new man" of the title representing Thompson himself, the new Canadian. Written more than a decade ago, when angry student protests were the order of the day, the story apparently reflects its author's uneasiness at having become part of a comfortable establishment. Thompson's first novel, *The Tenants Were Corrie and Tennie*, published in 1973, is in many respects a celebration of his adopted province and country. Its central character, William Boyd, is an American school teacher who visits New Brunswick during summer vacation. Finding Fredricton "blessedly untouched by the industrial revolution,"⁴ he determines to settle there.

If there are autobiographical echoes in this, they grow far louder when Boyd rents his apartment to Corrie, an American who will be teaching English at U.N.B., and his young wife, Tennie. The ensuing relationship between landlord and tenants, among other factors, creates a tension between the United States and Canada—which Thompson exploits to Canada's advantage. Boyd describes himself as an alien, having escaped the proverbial rat race and been "born again in his chosen character in the country of his choice" (p. 52). He exults at being able to breathe clean air and to walk the streets at night. In his vocabulary, "the Americans" and "the States" are villains, New Brunswick the promised land. Even in Tennie's description of her first trip across the Canadian border, there is obvious symbolism: "You know, when we moved up here we had to drive up through Maine . . . And it rained and rained and rained. And then, when we got to St. Stephen [a New Brunswick border town], the sun came out! It was lovely . . . Northern Maine seemed so desolate—as if we were running off the edge of the world, and then suddenly life seemed to begin again at St. Stephen" (p. 40). It is as though, once and for all, Thompson is taking his stand with Canada, declaring himself a Canadian writer. Interestingly, after *Corrie and Tennie*, as he settles comfortably into his new surroundings, the self-consciousness evident in this early work vanishes. There is no need for further apology.

In so far as it is possible to separate the components of a fictional work, Thompson, by his own admission, chooses to emphasize character. Discussing the "working principles" of his craft in an essay entitled "Academic Stuff," Thompson is emphatic in dismissing the kind of story which sets out to reveal a certain truth, and where the reader's duty is mainly to "solve the problem" or "see the point": "I do not want the reader of my stories to clap his hands and say, 'I see the point.' . . . I want to send the reader through a set of circumstances which will alter the reader's emotional awareness. I do not want to 'change the reader's mind.' I want to 'change his emotions.' Inevitably, I think, my way of writing a short story throws the emphasis of the short story away from the dramatic point of the intellectual insight and onto the immediate *experiencing* of the character."⁵ His stated intention, then, is to involve the reader in the life of the character; specifically, he sets out to "alter the reader's emotional awareness" by evoking his empathy and understanding.

To accomplish this, Thompson almost always uses the first-person point of view, which allows the reader to "judge or know the character as he might a close friend—with all the restrictions of 'knowing' that that entails, but with all the humanity of it too . . . with this approach the teller of the story is at least as important as the story itself. Quite often he *is* the story."⁶ Thompson's narrators tend to be loners who confide only in the reader, establishing a close one-to-one relationship, as in this passage from "Window on the Revolution": "You will notice that this

⁴*The Tenants Were Corrie and Tennie* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 153.

⁵In *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 236.

⁶*The Narrative Voice*, p. 236.

story, in fact, is constructed along the lines of a television script. The reasons for this are simple: I need money . . ." (*Shotgun*, p. 66). One drawback in repeatedly using the same first-person technique is that Thompson's narrators often sound disturbingly alike. They report in the same casual, detached manner and share the same personality quirks and habits of mind. Of course, this weakness is only evident when the stories are read together. Considered individually, nearly all of the central characters remain thoroughly convincing.

Thompson's approach is most effective when it draws us close enough to "experience a character" who is genuinely worth experiencing—and who is thus able to "change our emotions" in a meaningful way. Such is the case, for instance, in the companion pieces "Perhaps the Church Building Itself" and "Shotgun." The hero of both is an old man, on the brink of senility and unable to keep his thoughts in order. He is horror-stricken at the realization that his mind will soon be lost forever. Intending to gather information for his church discussion group, he can sit for an entire afternoon in the public library, until shaken, in panic, from his reverie. At one point, he discovers himself in his study late at night with a loaded shotgun in his hand, wondering whether he had been awakened by some sound, come down to investigate, and simply forgotten his purpose. There is a haunting truth in this, and perhaps because it touches such a universal chord, a note of sadness. In a knowing rather than sentimental way, we empathize not only with the old man but with everyone who faces the same terrifying reality. These stories are especially striking because they do, in a very real sense, alter our emotional awareness. Effective as well is the recent "A Blunt Affair," a story commissioned by the CBC to celebrate New Brunswick's 1984 bicentennial. It represents something of a new direction in Thompson's fiction in that it abandons the first person for an omniscient narrator. While this approach sacrifices none of the author's characteristic intimacy, it does provide a flexibility that he uses to great advantage. Centering on two individuals, a widow and a widower trapped in car overnight during a snowstorm, the story contains remarkably vivid descriptions which in Thompson's other work the constraints of the first person simply do not permit.

Of Thompson's three novels, only the third, *Shacking Up* (1980), seems to have been written with the same clear purpose as are his most successful stories. In the first two novels, *The Tenants Were Corrie and Tennie* (1973) and *Across from the Floral Park* (1974), Thompson appears uncertain whether he wants to stir our sense of compassion or simply titillate our sense of humor. He apparently attempts to do both at once, but with mixed results. His central characters, reporting as usual in the first person, have much in common. They are both certified "oddballs" who look askance at the world, even relish their eccentricity. Moreover, because both delight in the witty insult to put lesser mortals in place, their narratives are spiced with a certain comic energy. The comic aspect of the two novels, in fact, is their main appeal. What is bothersome is that both narrators tend to be long-winded. Their thoughts too often wander and they possess a curious inclination to dwell on the trivial. (While most of Thompson narrators share the same habit of mind, the short story seldom allows them enough range to become offensive.) These idle ramblings, no doubt, are meant to be humorous, and to a degree they are. However, neither character is able to sustain our interest. One amusing if not bizarre incident is heaped upon another, but they lead nowhere and add up to nothing. Eventually, the humor is so strained that the characters become dull and Thompson never succeeds in communicating the sense of compassion that is evident in his best work.

This is not the case with his most recent novel, *Shacking Up* (1980), which in many respects represents the author at his best. At its center is a young woman named Ellen, aged twenty-five, married, employed for four years in the same insurance office—in short, living a normal, if unexciting life. While on a routine coffee break one morning she meets an acquaintance of her husband ("Dennis

what's his name")⁷ and the two, innocently enough, agree to have lunch together. Before an hour passes, however, they are off to a motel, in one another's arms, and vowing their eternal love. This escapade, the "shacking up" of the title, lasts several days, ending finally when after a squabble the couple return to their respective spouses.

Shockingly unconventional conduct? An unlikely situation? Such, perhaps, is our initial reaction, if only because we have been conditioned to expect different from the likes of "ordinary" people. But this is precisely Thompson's point. "There is no such thing as a plain and simple person," reads a passage from the novel's headnote, "Even the girl who delivers bread . . . is as complicated as the history of one of your papal states" (p. 5). Thompson strongly suggests, as he frequently does elsewhere, that people only appear ordinary, that the exterior they present to the world merely serves to mask a complex inner self. His serious mission as an artist is to demonstrate just how fascinating, and more importantly, how deserving of empathy, the "average" person really is. He does this so exceptionally well in *Shacking Up* that the novel—or more precisely, the emotional effect induced by the novel—is by itself a fitting final comment on the entire body of Thompson's work. The reader feels pathos for Ellen, but beyond this immediate response is a more compelling one: a striking realization that we need to be more conscious of others. Indeed, the lasting merit of Thompson's fiction is in its continuing insistence that all of our fellow beings deserve to be understood; his work, in general, succeeds to the degree in which it is able to evoke this response.

⁷Kent Thompson, *Shacking Up* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980), p. 7.