

Craig Francis Power. *The Hope*. St. John's: Pedlar, 2016. ISBN 978-1-89714-178-6

One of my fondest memories of my time teaching first-year English literature courses at Memorial University is the November day I entered class to a booming, baritone greeting from a hitherto silent student seated, as usual, in the back of the room. Unmoved by Othello, unimpressed by “The Tell-Tale Heart,” this student was stirred from his doldrums by the assigned reading for the day, Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” and declared his sudden sentience in a perfect townie twang: “This story is burnt, sir, and you’re a burnout!” I was reminded of this moment as I made my way through Craig Francis Power’s *The Hope*. — this book is burnt, and I am pretty sure Power is a burnout.

This is by no means a criticism. In fact, it is highly complimentary. Reading Jackson’s dark social commentary, my student was confronted by the unexpected and the unfamiliar — the “burnt,” to use the parlance of the period and place. Reading “The Lottery” was for this student the very sort of mind-altering, life-changing, watershed moment university education should provide. His declaration that morning is so memorable for me because, in assigning for reading and analysis Jackson’s bleak allegory, I became for that student in that moment the sort of challenging, different, mind-expanding instructor I was aspiring to be — the “burnout,” as it were. Reading *The Hope* triggered this memory for me because I believe my experience reading that novel (and it is an experience Power provides here) was not dissimilar to my student’s experience reading “The Lottery” — both of us found ourselves reading something entirely new, guided by a voice entirely different from the ones we had grown accustomed to hearing. I have never read anything like Power’s sophomore novel, and it must be counted along with Sarah Tilley’s *Duke* and Jessica Grant’s *Come, Thou Tortoise* as one of the truly unique novels to come out of Newfoundland and Labrador in recent years.

Yet, for all its singularity, *The Hope* is still very much a Newfoundland and Labrador novel, and in its way is like every other novel to

come out of the province in recent years. Power tries to cram onto his pages as many cultural, geographical, historical, and literary references to Newfoundland and Labrador as he can. In fact, Power's book should also sit alongside Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails*, Michael Crummey's *Galore*, Bernice Morgan's *Cloud of Bone*, and a few others as one of the contenders for the title of "The Great Newfoundland and Labrador Novel." That this was one of Power's aspirations in writing the novel, even if ironically, I have no doubt, and it is a belief only further confirmed for me by the book's earlier (perhaps working?) title: "The.Motherfucking.Bible." Yet Power's shot at greatness is also a backhanded slap that hits flush and frequently. What Herb Wyile, foremost scholar of Atlantic Canadian literature, has said of New Brunswick novelist David Adams Richards can also be said of Power in this instance: he persists "in his artistic vision while happily tipping the sacred cows of what he sees as a self-righteously progressive, middle-class academic and literary establishment." *The.Hope.* is as much a contribution to the canon of Newfoundland and Labrador literature as it is a metafictional lampooning of itself, its contemporaries, and the whole scholarly and financial system by which it draws breath. It is in this way a delightfully and distressingly uncanny read. The familiar is made decidedly unfamiliar, and unsure of where to stand in the face of such a work, the reader can only run after it, beguiled, bemused, confused, delighted.

The novel's conceit is the road trip: narrator Joe Penny is joining his long-time friend, casual sex partner, occasional muse, sexual obsession, object of desire, Catherine Prince on a six-day drive from St. John's to Portland Creek on Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula — though it is perhaps really a four-day drive to Corner Brook so Catherine (whose book, *Paradise*, has transformed her suddenly into Newfoundland literature's newest, shiniest *enfant terrible*) can participate on the fifth day in "The Dandelion," a literary festival where Joe will also pitch to an agent his own unpublished manuscript. On the sixth day the two plan to part — in many ways for good, the novel seems to intimate — as Catherine will drive off with Martin, the open-minded

other half of her open-ended relationship, and Joe will set up camp and fly-fish the area made famous by the legendary American outdoorsman, Lee Wulff, Joe's other obsession and to whom he in large part narrates his story.

Yes, Power has his protagonist tell his story in the first person but not to us. Joe is fanatically infatuated with Wulff, a real-life conservationist who is credited with beginning the discussions that would result eventually in the creation of Gros Morne National Park, and an outfitting entrepreneur who played a major part in establishing Newfoundland as an unspoiled destination for recreational fishers and hunters. Thus does Joe's love of the man he refers to constantly as "dear Lee" come with a dark edge, as Wulff could be considered one of the earliest culture vultures to begin what would become the promotion and objectification of place that Joe cannot abide: "I know that you, Lee — American, wealthy, famous — helped start what has become the cultural tourism industry of my homeland — Newfoundland — the wasteland." At the age of eighty-six, experienced pilot Wulff died when he crashed his plane just outside Hancock, New York, yet Joe wilfully and repeatedly imagines Wulff crashing in the wilds of Newfoundland and Labrador: "the terrain, the spruce and the sharp needles of the branches tossing in that endless wind, the rocks and the desolate, terrible landscape coming up up up right into your face." This peculiar preoccupation gives rise to some of the most beautifully idiosyncratic sentences I have ever read, as when Joe compares Wulff to Catherine, who he imagines breaking from a book tour in Beijing to be serviced by prostitutes: "I wonder about your hands on the controls of that bush plane going down — down, Lee like the heads of Catherine's handmaidens in a hotel room in a place I've never been." At times Power matches Joe's obsessions with his other issues and eccentricities, like his chronic hemorrhoids or the little people-hating dictator he imagines living inside him forcing his anti-social behaviour: "I feel him down there running the whole thing, and he's more Franco than Hitler, a fiery Catholic military man from old Castille who makes the whole Down Below burn in the

very same way that the Nationalists back in 1939 made the country scorch and bleed like my asshole does, like the way the fuselage of your plane may have gone up like a torch of freedom in the wretched, bleak night of a Labrador reckoning.” Where else can one hope to find a sentence such as this?

It is this unceasing invention that makes *The.Hope.* such a compelling and rewarding text. It reads like a book that is incessantly creating and destroying itself. At times it reads like Johnston’s opus if the love between his protagonists, Joe Smallwood and Sheilagh Fielding, had been a little less Unrequited. At times it reads as if Power is doing for Wulff what John Steffler did for his eponymous hero in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. At times it reads like an irreverent implosion of those works and the entire notion of Newfoundland and Labrador literature (there is even a shot or two at Al Pittman in there). At times the whole book reads like a detour, the story Joe has inadvertently told while searching for a way to examine an entirely separate and tragic part of his life. It is a book that does it all while simultaneously threatening to throw it all away. Thankfully, this book at war with itself stops just short of destruction, and we can all hold onto *The.Hope.*

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