

Paul Bowdring. *Mister Nightingale*. Halifax: Nimbus, 2016. ISBN 978-1-77108-379-9

An article from *The Onion* — “Unemployed, Miserable Man Still Remembers Teacher Who First Made Him Fall In Love With Writing” — ironically captures the struggle of the writing life. “Unemployed” and “miserable” aptly describe the titular narrator, James Nightingale, of Paul Bowdring’s *Mister Nightingale*. Despite his lack of money, however, he is viewed as an important cultural figure in Newfoundland, and he is rewarded with a certain level of attention and respect. Bowdring’s development of his narrator poses some serious questions about what it means to be a writer in Canada, and although the picaresque, character-driven style of this novel might prevent it from reaching a broad, casual readership, *Mister Nightingale* is a profound and hilarious meditation on the lives of artists.

Is the writing life heroic or is it pathetic? This question haunts Bowdring’s narrator, who shares anecdotes of authors who have been trampled by their calling. For example, Nightingale speaks of a photograph “of a writer . . . [w]ith over thirty unpublished books to his credit . . . the haughty expression on his face, his unwelcoming eyes and downturned mouth, testified before one and all that he would not give a fucking inch . . . O come, all ye faithful, bitter and defeated” (208). The struggle of the writing life is so palpably crafted that it is hard not to pity the artists in Bowdring’s novel. At the same time, there is something heroic in their persistence, in their willingness to go on, to fight against despair and poverty in the name of art. Nightingale writes, “Though doggedly loyal . . . to that intractable thing called Literature, and to that Beckettian motto of despairing hopefulness, hopeful hopelessness . . . I can’t go on. I’ll go on. Sometimes I’m not sure which is worse” (321). Those who write are certain of its importance; they are willing to work with little to no pay in favour of non-monetary rewards. Those who do not write in Bowdring’s novel tend to emphasize the lack of money and the generally poor living conditions of authors. Non-writers struggle to

see the purpose of writing, whereas writers seem to view their work as a grand quest.

Importantly, however, Bowdring moves past the self-imposed despair of the writing life to narrate concrete factors contributing to the difficulties that authors face. The most compelling moments of the text are the details provided about the economics of authorship. Nightingale's ex-wife describes the financial woes of the titular author: "the banks won't let you buy it [a house]. They won't give you a mortgage because your income is too low. It's not even minimum wage" (53). Virginia Woolf wrote of a room of one's own, but Nightingale can barely afford that. There is also Nightingale's self-assured and deeply serious poet friend, Kevin, who subsists on root soup and supplements his income by working as a chicken catcher on the "late-night catching crew" (23). These artists have little financial security or reward, particularly for individuals who are publicly acknowledged as culturally important figures to their province. After all, the novel opens with Nightingale receiving a provincial award for his creative output.

This critique of the writing life is paired with timely social commentary. In one of the more powerful moments, Kevin-the-chicken-catching-poet discusses the influence of the oil economy on Newfoundlanders, comparing it to that of authors. He says, "And as for oil royalties, we're getting writers' rates or worse . . . 50 percent for the publishers, i.e., the oil companies, the investors: 40 percent for the bookstores — the oil companies again, retail division; and 10 percent or less for the writers — the owners, the governments, us, we the poets, we the people" (179). It does not matter how much one cultivates oneself or how much an entire province is willing to extract from its own landscape; the bulk of the capital will always go to those who have the money, the education, and the influence to ensure the percentages work out in their favour.

What becomes of artists in this world? Whatever the outcome, Canadian novelists will not be tossing stacks of multicoloured bills into the air anytime soon. As Nightingale reveals to his wealthy brother-in-law, Loyal, he "made \$12,400 last year, before taxes. An

outstanding year” (53). Nevertheless, the reward for a life of artistic production is not financial but cultural. Nightingale hints at one reason he has continued to write throughout his life: “all any writer wants from the dribbling fountain of a critick’s fountain pen is the answer to a simple question (well, maybe two . . . maybe three): Is it dead or is it alive, and will it be alive one hundred years from now? Put another way: is the workworkwork of art a work of art or isn’t it?” (166). To be known after death through one’s art — it is an insane wager to make with one’s life. The result will not be known by the literary gambler, and if the wager is won, it will not be on the author’s terms. If the wager is lost, has it been a life wasted? Do the critics get to decide which authors live on and which ones are forgotten, or are there other — ahem — economic forces that determine which authors continue to be read?

Such questions and thoughts have stayed with me since I finished reading *Mister Nightingale*. That seems to be an important detail to remember about this text. Although I do not know if Bowdring’s work will be alive 100 years from now, it is alive now. Images and moments remain vivid in my memory. In particular, the scene in which Kevin-the-chicken-catching-poet talks about meeting his literary hero, that they “passed each other walking on opposite sides of the road, clouds of dust drifting up between them from a car that had just passed by” (195). That scene is as powerfully rendered as anything I have read. In another poignant moment, Nightingale writes, “Is the un-lived life a mere fantasy . . . a feeling rooted in regret, loss, bitterness, a sense of failure? . . . There was someone or something else we could have been, should have been; something we should have done, but we didn’t do it” (241). Although this seems to be a novel about writers written for writers, the narrator’s wisdom, insight, and humour might be enough to entertain casual readers as well.

Dense and contemplative, *Mister Nightingale* might be written only for those who are willing to work for their pleasure, but that work will be rewarded. The pages of this novel are layered with humour and insight, but perhaps most rewarding are Bowdring’s veteran grace and

skill. For aspiring writers and for the initiated, for the successful and for the defeated, this is a novel that should be read and read closely. When I think of Bowdring, one of the lesser known but more talented Newfoundland authors, I cannot help but think of him repeating Beckett's mantra to himself as he wrote *Mister Nightingale*: "I can't go on; I'll go on." Yet, he persists, extracting moments from people's lives, and recording them in the literary history of Newfoundland. Anyone who takes the time to read his novels will be richer for the experience.

Tom Halford
Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland