

WILL THE REAL R. MARK MADHAM
PLEASE STAND UP: A NOTE ON
ROBERT KROETSCH'S **GONE INDIAN**

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As Rosemary Sullivan has recently observed: "The starting point for any Kroetsch novel is the recognition of the importance of the 'old dualities.'" ¹ By tracing out the deployment of these dualities — "chaos/order; life/death; freedom (movement)/stasis; beginnings/endings" — Sullivan demonstrates that *The Words of My Roaring* is a rather more complex book than "the straightforward picaresque adventure of . . . a wild, priapic hero" that it, "on first reading," seems to be. ² She also perceptively assesses both *The Studhorse Man* and *Badlands*. But this critic does not discuss the novel that best exemplifies Robert Kroetsch's characteristic technique. Not only does *Gone Indian* abound with "binary distinctions" — the "matched opposites" that Sullivan perceives as Kroetsch's "structuralist model" — these paired opposites are also played off against each other. Indeed, one dual polarity (the difference between the real and the imagined Professor R. Mark Madham, the similarity between Jeremy Sadness and his very different professor) is so playfully presented that it may not be present at all. Which is simply another dichotomy. Do we have, with the few hints as to Madham's other possible identity, a carefully hidden clue or a subtle misdirection designed to trap the too subtle?

In short, *Gone Indian* represents Kroetsch's most sustained balancing act. Much of that balancing depends, of course, on the "old dualities" already mentioned. Thus Jeremy Sadness abandons the stasis of prolonged failure as a graduate student to fly northwest, perhaps to a new life or perhaps to death. Since the matter of his final fate is another question not conclusively resolved, Jeremy's prospective new beginning might mark his definite end, his fatal fall

¹Rosemary Sullivan, "The Fascinating Place Between: The Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," *Mosaic*, 11 No. 3 (1978), p. 168.

²Sullivan, pp. 168-69.

from the high Ketchamoot Bridge. Or his apparent end (the fall was possibly a charade) might constitute the real new beginning. The whole uncertain process from beginning/end (of graduate career) to end/beginning (of wilderness career, providing the death was faked) is even more problematic in that it is doubly redacted. Jeremy orders the chaos of his experience by talking of it into his tape recorder. The tapes are then sent to Madham, who, as editor of the book, reorders to his own self-justifying purposes Jeremy's chaotic ordering. The result is two unclear self-portraits joined in one blurred double exposure. Each man, half successful at exposing the limitations of the other, also partially succeeds in exposing something of his own limitations.

This pairing in opposition of co-protagonists and co-narrators brings us to a basic dichotomy in *Gone Indian* but one not included in Sullivan's brief catalogue. I refer to the hoary opposition of youth versus age, a structuring device that dates from at least Greek New Comedy but one to which Kroetsch still gives a few new twists of his own. Thus Professor R. Mark Madham and his student, Jeremy Sadness, are in conflict throughout the novel, Jeremy asserting his own hard won experience by denouncing Madham as a pompous, unproductive pedant, and Madham asserting his youthful prowess by conducting an extended affair with Jeremy's wife, Carol. The usual comic resolution, wisdom to the aged and the woman to the younger man, is here reversed. Yet that reversal does not resolve the issues in Kroetsch's plot. Neither man wins. The old order, represented by the professor, is not affirmed; Jeremy does not embody any emergent redeemed, renewed society. Jeremy's envisioned new beginning and new life are both, in fact, rather old ones. To go Indian is, by now, a definitely outdated escape from the trials of civilization. Furthermore, to go Indian, for Jeremy, is to go Grey Owl, to go Archie Bellamy — hardly an original move. And neither is Jeremy the first ABD to chuck the dissertation and opt for finding himself in the real world, the real world as he imagines it to be.

The same conflict between Madham and Jeremy is played out in a minor key by the mother-daughter pair of Bea and Jill Sunderman. Again the play is idiosyncratic. Mother and daughter compete for Roger Dorck, who lies comatose during most of the novel, and for Jeremy, who, lying down, might as well be comatose. Jill, at the end, has Dorck, who emerges from his coma with the past twenty-eight years of his memory erased, while Bea and Jeremy have absconded

together. So youth wins age, age partly renewed, while age wins (if gaining Jeremy can be graced by the term "wins") youth. The two older men, Madham and Dorck, are very much present at the end of the novel. They also possess the two younger women, Carol and Jill, who are, coincidentally, the same age. Jeremy and Bea have disappeared, perhaps to an accidental death, perhaps to a faked death and a new life.

The disposition of the ladies is but one example of the balancing of opposites that pervades *Gone Indian*. There are, however, a few substantial hints that the balancing might be still more pervasive. These hints center on R. Mark Madham, the narrator of the novel, who perhaps plays a larger role in the novel than he is willing to admit, and on Robert Sunderman, the man most missing in the action as described. The latter character, it will be recalled, was the "boy-husband" who was also the perfect hockey prospect. Trapped in premature adulthood by his pregnant "child-bride," he made his escape through a hole knocked in the ice. The apparent accidental death was belied by the one phone call that the victim made to his young wife after he had "drowned." Nonetheless, Bea Sunderman was left a widow to bear and raise Jill, while Robert Sunderman was left a man freed from his old present and ready for a new life, a new identity.

It is at this point that the professor's past becomes a matter of pertinent conjecture, conjecture invited by the very manner in which Madham reticently proclaims his own western heritage even while he also maintains that any attendant facts or supplemental explanations are immaterial, irrelevant: "The truth is," Madham writes, early in the novel, "I was myself born out there on those wind-torn prairies, on the ripped edge of that northern forest — the details are unimportant."³ There is a certain coy note in the final disclaimer. That same false note is struck in the few other allusions that Madham makes to his elusive Alberta birth and upbringing. Late in the novel, for example, he can observe, "I happen to know something about cold weather — perhaps I have mentioned as much" (p. 124). Furthermore, the very few details that he does provide are important. Madham, at forty-seven, is approximately the same age that Sunderman would be. Even more to the point, he once admits, "I

³Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), p. 13. Subsequent references to the novel will be made parenthetically in the text.

played a bit of hockey out there myself. When I was a boy." That admission is immediately played down with the question, "Didn't we all?", and then played up again: "Even now I wear a bridge where my right eye-tooth used to be. And Carol will sometimes fondly run her tongue over the solid gold, teasing in her youthful way about my past exploits" (p. 37). So Sunderman's "perfect physique for hockey" (p. 131) well might continue on in Madham's "squash-player's perfect figure" (p. 60, and one of Jeremy's few tributes to his professor). That same possible identification is also suggested by Madham, too, when he "grieves" that Bea Sunderman's house is finally empty. In editing the tapes, he has "come to love that old house as well as if it were my own" (p. 154).⁴

Kroetsch teases us with the idea that it was, with the various hints that the drowned Robert Sunderman has resurfaced as R. Mark Madham. That seeming conjunction of seeming opposites — the young hockey player, the middle-aged academic — redefines a number of oppositions in the novel and particularly the central polarity of student versus professor. Jeremy, the New York City boy who dreamed west, was drawn to Madham, "a western boy who ever dreamed east" (p. 95). As substitute son and student extension of the professor, Jeremy, sent west, shows that Madham can, at least vicariously, go home again. Yet Madham, in the east, regularly declaims on "my northwest" about which Jeremy "knew *nothing*" (p. 101). The real irony, however, well might be the manner in which Jeremy fulfills his unacknowledged mission too well, by-passing Edmonton to reach Notikeewin, ending up in Bea Sunderman's bed. (The professor, of course, is, at the time, in Carol's.) There is also the distinct possibility that Jeremy has learned the real lesson of his master and dies (falsely) from the old life to enter (under false pretenses) into a new one. "One false move, Professor, and instead of addressing you, I'll be you" (p. 12). Madham vociferously insists, in the final pages of the novel, that such a hypothesis, espoused by Carol, is impossible. He protests, perhaps, too much. Carol, "carried away by her imagination, would have the conspirators planting the snowmobile on the track, then scurrying away to catch the train when it stopped, which in truth it did" (p.

⁴There are other obvious hints too. Thus Jeremy's first reaction to Bea concludes with the unlikely comment. "This, Professor, is the woman you should have married" (p. 30).

151). His greater knowledge should dispel "that kind of silliness." And he knows whereof he speaks; he "came east on that same line," "rode that [same] train" (p. 153).

How much the two men rode the same train in an archetypal western journey towards a new beginning must remain a matter for conjecture.⁵ Kroetsch resolutely refuses to resolve the venerable comic questions of disguise and hidden identity that the novel posits. Yet the question that I have considered, the suggested secret past of Professor Madham, a question that is finally unanswerable, still gives us another structuring polarity in the novel. The first sentence of the book is the beginning of Madham's response to Jill Sunderman's previous letter: "At the end of your letter you ask me, in your offhand manner, to 'explain everything.' Let me reply that I feel under no obligation to explain anything" (p. 1). Some one hundred and fifty pages later we are still not certain if he has explained everything, anything, or nothing.

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⁵As Kroetsch has emphasized in a recent review of Dick Harrison's *Unnamed Country*: "The habit of beginnings, of starting again, is deeply ingrained in the western consciousness, and comedy is its necessary expression." "The Disappearing Father and Harrison's Born-Again and Again and Again West," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, #11 (Summer, 1978), p. 9.