

“Our symbiotic relationship with the stories that we tell”

An Interview with Michael Crummey

Michael Crummey is one of the foremost contemporary writers of Newfoundland. His poetry and fiction is renowned for its focus on the stories and traditions of Newfoundland culture, exploring in the process questions of prejudice, betrayal, loyalty, and memory. A central theme of his work is the mixed form of indebtedness people in the present owe to the past as inheritors of its traditions, prejudices, violence, stories, and acts of courage. As Crummey elucidates in this interview, these myriad forms of cultural memory combine in intangible ways to constitute the living world of contemporary Newfoundlanders.

Crummey was born in Buchans, a mining town in the interior of Newfoundland, an area that informs much of his writing. He completed a BA in English at Memorial University in St. John's. While at Memorial, he won the University's Gregory J. Power Poetry Contest (1986), which inspired him to devote himself to a writing career. In 1994, he won the Bronwen Wallace Memorial Award for the most promising unpublished poet; his first volume of poetry, *Arguments with Gravity* (1996), won the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador Book Award. His second and perhaps best-known poetry volume, *Hard Light* (1998), is a collection of prose poems that retell ancestral stories of outport Newfoundland. This book contains his acclaimed prose poem "Bread," about a couple who grow to love one another through experiences of trial and hardship. The book was nominated for the Milton Acorn People's Poetry Prize in 1999. His most recent collections of poetry include *Emergency Roadside Assistance* (2001) and *Salvage* (2002).

After completing an MA at Queen's University, Crummey turned his attention full time to writing. Around this time he published *Flesh and Blood* (1998), a collection of short stories set in a fictional mining town in central Newfoundland, which was nominated for the Journey Prize. In 2000, he returned to live in Newfoundland, and there published his first novel *River Thieves* (2001), which quickly became a Canadian bestseller. This novel offers a fictional treatment of the final days of the colonial conquest of the Beothuk people in early nineteenth-century Newfoundland. It is a complex and wrenching treatment of a pivotal moment in Newfoundland's colonial history, evoking the ways this history impinges on present-day Newfoundlanders who are positioned as inheritors of this genocide. The novel tells the story of the capture of Demasduit (Mary March), one of the last of the Beothuk, and the settlers who try to recruit her into becoming their liaison with her people. Crummey takes the gaps in the historical record as a central premise in his novel. Demasduit uses language (or the rejection of language) as a form of defiance, refusing to speak English in only but the most rudimentary manner. This resistance parallels the overall resistance of the historical record about the Beothuk, which cannot transparently mediate between the present and the past yet nevertheless persists as part of the inheritance of contemporary Newfoundland culture. *River Thieves* won the Thomas Head Raddall Award and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize.

Crummey's second novel, *The Wreckage* (2005), set during the Second World War, navigates questions of destiny and forgiveness—both in the context of interpersonal experience and in terms of global violence. Like many of his writings, it concerns the inexorably contingent nature of human fate—what the narrator terms “the rain of incident and circumstance” (165)—and the difficulty people have of salvaging something meaningful from the flotsam and jetsam of their lives. It is this probing concern with questions of contingency that contributes to the power of Crummey's fictional portrayals of Newfoundland people, culture, and history.

His most recent novel, *Galore* (2009), was a finalist for the 2009 Governor General's Award and, in 2010, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book in the Canada and Caribbean region and the Canadian Authors' Association Award. *Galore* is a transgenerational magic realist epic set in an outport community in Newfoundland, replete with folklore, mystery, ghosts, love affairs gone awry, greed, ambition, and retribution (of a kind). A central theme is the way we need stories as a form of sustenance, in part because they affirm a sense of continuity over time. Toward the end of the novel, one

of the central figures, Callum Devine, explains what he most misses about the wayward priest Father Phelan. It is not his religious instruction, for the priest was relentlessly mercurial, but rather the sense he conveyed that “the people on the shore were something more than an inconsequential accident in the world” (143). Throughout his work, Crummey explores the inescapable contingencies of people’s lives, tracing their need to believe in some thread of connection with the past, whether conscious or not, sometimes in the form of legend, sometimes in the form of circuitous physical or cultural inheritance. In this interview, Crummey discusses how these questions inform *Galore* and many of his other writings, particularly the ways conceptions of the “carry-on” effect of inheritance and emplacement are integral to Newfoundlanders’ sense of cultural-historical identity.

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Cynthia Sugars (cs): One of the things that’s hard to forget about *Galore* is the opening scene, with Judah coming out of the whale.¹ I was wondering if you could talk to me a bit about that, where that came from in your mind, and whether that was the originating moment of the book for you.

Michael Crummey (mc): No . . . the originating moment was reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which was a book I had avoided most of my life because I had it in my head that I disliked magic realism. Magic realism, in my mind, felt like a completely unnatural marriage of elements that didn’t belong together. And it felt like a cheat; it felt like if you can do anything, as an author, then there’s no work to do. So I had avoided ever reading Marquez, and then just by accident came across the book and thought, well, I’ll take a shot. And what I loved about what he was doing in that book was the way in which the otherworldly elements were treated in exactly the same way that everything else was treated. It was like describing rainfall, or gravity. And there was an afterword to that book in which he said he had tried to write that book a number of times, and failed miserably, and it only worked when he decided he would tell the stories in exactly the way his grandparents used to tell them—which was as if they were absolutely true, with no ironic distance at all.

There was so much in that book that was completely foreign to me, but as I was reading it, I kept thinking, “This is just like home. This is just like

Newfoundland.” And I thought there’s a book to be written about the place that does some of the same things with that material. So I wanted to write a book about the lore of the place, the folklore of the place. But I’d never thought of it as magic realism. My sense of outport Newfoundland—and I think this is still true among the older folks in outport Newfoundland—was that they had lived between two worlds: there was the physical world, the ocean, and the rock that they lived on, and then there was also a kind of netherworld that they had populated with stories from the old country, about fairies or witchcraft, superstitions. Then there’s whatever happens in Newfoundland itself, the ghost stories, the folk cures, and all that sort of stuff. And they didn’t distinguish between them in their minds, one wasn’t more real than the other, and they impacted their lives in the same way. They were both just as real. So I don’t think of the book as magic realism so much as real realism. I was trying to recreate that sense of a world where those things were taken at face value. So I was collecting a ton of what I felt was amazing material, some of which just came from talking to friends, you know. A lot of that world is still there, just barely below the surface of the SUVs and flat screen televisions and coffee shops—you just have to scratch a little bit to find it.

But I wasn’t sure how to start a book like that. I really had no idea where I would start. And I was standing in my kitchen, I don’t know why, this song that I was forced to sing in school called “Jack Was Every Inch a Sailor” came into my head—I don’t know how many people know it—Jack is swept overboard, swallowed by a whale—which I’ve since discovered is an old English dancehall song, so not originally from Newfoundland at all. But everybody in Newfoundland knows it.

And then there’s also the story of Jonah from the bible. The bible, and religion in general, were so inextricably entwined in those people’s lives. I really like the way this notion of a person coming out of the belly of a whale cuts on both of those things, the folkloric side and the biblical side. So just at that moment I said, okay, well I’ll start with that, I’ll have a man come out of the belly of a whale and hope for the best. [*laughs*] And I thought, well, if he’s coming out of the belly of a whale, he’ll probably be bleached, really, really white, and he’ll probably stink like hell. But that’s all I knew when I started, and so a lot of the book was writing a story in which the people are trying to make sense of Judah as they go, in the same way that I was trying to make sense of Judah as I went.

cs: One of the details in the book is that he has this fish stink that never goes away, and I don’t remember whether it’s the doctor who diagnoses it or

somebody else, but they give it a label, bromhidrosis,² which is a wonderful detail. What I liked, too, is the way that you have that fish stink become something that's inherited after that by various descendants of Judah. So I want to ask you about the way you mythologize inheritance; it's one of the things I love about the book. I'm thinking about the ways that you have things that are not genetic become inherited.

MC: Well, Newfoundland's a really interesting place. It's like a little tiny Petri dish, you know, there haven't been a whole lot of outside influences on it since those first Europeans settled there. There are about a half a million people there, and ninety-some per cent of them are direct descendants of an original European settler population of about twenty-thousand—seventeen- to eighteen-thousand—pretty much a fifty-fifty split between Irish and West Country English—and there are a whole bunch of other smaller things in the mix, but that's basically the line. So the two main families in the book became stand-ins for those two lines.

I've also recently discovered that in a lot of these kinds of communities, there are researchers from all over the world coming to Newfoundland to study genetics because it's a genetic isolate. Some of these small Newfoundland communities are about the same as Hutterite or Amish communities in terms of how genetically isolated they are. So in many ways, Newfoundlanders today are who Newfoundlanders were three-hundred or four-hundred years ago, genetically. So I really wanted to play with that in the book. So many things are passed on genetically, of course, the colour of the hair, the ability to sing, all those sorts of things, Judah's stink, all of that stuff gets passed on from one generation to the next. But I was also thinking that the folklore of a place, in a way, is like the cultural DNA of a community, and that's passed on in exactly the same way. And a lot of the book was me playing with this notion of our kind of symbiotic relationship with the stories that we tell. I think that's a human trait, and in Newfoundland it's kind of concentrated.

These stories I was working with were stories that were created and told by Newfoundlanders, but now those stories tell us who we are, as Newfoundlanders, and are creating Newfoundlanders—and that circle is something that I wanted the book to model somehow. So all of that inheritance stuff was kind of a metaphor for the way that those stories are still telling us who we are. Newfoundland now is nothing like Newfoundland as it was even fifty years ago. And when I started writing the book I thought I was writing a book about the past, but what amazed me was how much of that stuff is still present and how much it still affects us.

One of my favourite stories—I was talking to friends of my parents—and they told me about somebody from up the shore who had died, and sat up in his coffin at the funeral and walked home. And of course, the coffin was good wood, and he couldn't let it go to waste, so he made a day bed out of it, and slept on that for years—until he died the second time. And I've heard stories like that in just about every corner of Newfoundland. Every community in Newfoundland has a story about some guy waking up at a funeral or just as he's about to be buried. And I think the reason that that story is so omnipresent, and why it's told so often, other than the fact that it's a crazy story, is that it's a metaphor for the place itself. Newfoundland has always been an incredibly difficult place to make a go of it, and there have been times in all of these communities when it looks like it's done. And then often it's not, there's this completely unexpected resurrection, or at least people get through it and carry on. So that story to me became a touchstone for all kinds of storylines in the book, and it starts with Judah coming out of the belly of the whale, but then there's Little Lazarus, who has this unexpected resurrection, and the guy pulled out of the weird submarine that's made—all of which became a metaphor for the place itself within the novel.

cs: And at the end of the book we have the character of Abel, who is Judah's great-great-grandson . . . he seems to be on the verge of becoming another Judah for the community. I think he sees a whale over the side of the boat.

MC: In a way the book circles on itself, and I was playing with that notion of how our relationship to the stories is a circle as well. But it suggests that the book goes back to the beginning and starts over again. And in many ways the people in these communities were really fatalistic and suffered a great deal, so I always had a bit of a mixed relationship to that ending. Am I saying that it just starts over again, and we go through all the same crap again? Really?

When I started writing the book I didn't really know what the ending was going to be, but I knew that somebody was going to be saved by the fact that they were a direct descendant of the guy that came out of the belly of the whale—and it wasn't until I was three-quarters of the way through the book that I realized it was probably going to be more than that, that it was going to return. There's a movement in the book away from the magical sort of otherworldly stuff as the outside world impinges on it, and that stuff moves into the shadows as the book progresses. So what we have at the end of the novel is a man who's . . . lost himself. He's gone overseas to the war, and through a shelling incident has lost all memory of himself, he's lost his ability to speak. He doesn't know where he came from, who he is. And the way I

saw the ending was that what saved him in the end are those stories. What comes back to tell him who he is are those stories that he's been told about the people that came before him—and that sends him naked over the side of a boat chasing a whale, basically.

CS: There's also the fish stink. . . .

MC: [*laughs*] He's also saved by the stink because the German soldiers who come upon him think he's been dead for quite a while, and they just leave him be. I had that in my head very early on, but the taking it that much further was something that I didn't get to until I was well into the book.

CS: You say that if you scratch below the surface of a Newfoundlander you come across these stories. So I want to ask you, are you superstitious?

MC: No, I'm not myself superstitious. I did live in a haunted house. [*laughs*] But I'm not superstitious. I would say that I'm a skeptic; I don't buy otherworldly things as a rule. A lot of people ask about the stories in this book and say, "Was it true? Did that really happen?" And I think that's got nothing to do with it. Whether these things are true or not is irrelevant. What's important is whether or not the people who tell those stories believe they're true. Or if they impact the lives of the people in the community as if they were true.

I did own a house in which my bed used to shake me awake in the middle of the night. And just a couple of days ago I was at the Ship³ and a young guy came up to ask—he's working on a PhD in folklore—and he wanted to talk to me about some stuff and he said, "Oh by the way, I lived at 6 Chapel Street for a while," which is the house I used to own, and he said, "I think that fucking place is haunted." So I don't know what's going on there.

CS: Elements of mythology and inheritance also come up in the stories in *Flesh and Blood*—I'm thinking in particular of the story "After Image." What I like especially is the boy in that story, who is part of a family, but he's been adopted . . . and so he turns himself into an authentic family member by, well, setting fire to himself in a sense. I'm wondering if you could talk about that story a little bit.

MC: That's a story that kind of started in some of the same ways that *Galore* started for me—it was a collection of stories I'd heard about the town I grew up in. Just strange stories . . . there was a woman who worked at the hospital who used to tell fortunes for women in the evening. There was a friend of ours who was really badly disfigured in an electrical accident. There was a story about the town my Dad was from in which lightning entered the house through a stove . . . someone got up to put wood in the stove and when they opened the dampers of the stove lightning came through the chimney, ball

lightning, and it circled the baseboard. And the mother basically got her broom and went to the door and swept it outside as it was going by.

There were a bunch of stories like that that just were really interesting to me and they seemed to fit together somehow. So I wrote a story in which I tried to create characters in which those kinds of things came into play.

And there was a family in the town that I grew up in who were kind of outcasts. They were looked down upon, and when I was a kid, if you touched them by accident, you were said to have the family's name "touch"—and you could only get rid of it by passing it on to someone else—which was a horrific thing, I mean, it's an awful memory. So I created a family of outcasts who were also special in a way. And this little kid was adopted, not knowing he was adopted into the family, and stands out because he's so ordinary. He intuitively doesn't belong, even though he doesn't know it. And it's about his attempt to find a place in that family, and he ends up badly burning himself, more or less by accident, but is confirmed in his place in the family by his disfigurement—which I had always thought of as kind of a beautiful thing.

But I remember it was turned into a stage play, and I talked to a friend afterwards, who is transgender, and he was appalled by it. You know, the sense that, "So what are you saying, that people are willing to deform themselves to fit the norm that they want to belong to? or that the family pressure forces people to?" Which is not something I'd ever seen in the story . . . so, perspective is everything I guess.

cs: It could be that he makes the story his own . . .

mc: Well that's how I thought.

cs: The play *Afterimage* won the Governor General's Award in 2010, didn't it?

mc: That's right, Robert Chafe's adaptation.

cs: So what was that like, watching one of your stories transform?

mc: This was a company in St. John's called Artistic Fraud—one of the most innovative theatre companies in the country, I think. Jillian Keiley is the artistic director—she's out of her mind—and Robert is the playwright-in-residence. He writes most of their shows. And when they sat me down to say they wanted to adapt "After Image" for the stage, and Jill was going to create an electrified stage with a copper floor and wire walls, and all the actors were going to be hooked up, they were going to be wired to their costumes so they could light lightbulbs and spark off each other, I thought, you know . . . that's not do-able! [*laughs*]

But they did it! And Robert, who's a fantastic writer, he invited me to be as involved as I wanted to be, and to collaborate with him as much as I wanted.

And I said, “You know, I’d rather you just take it.” By that point the story was twelve to fourteen years old to me, and I’d forgotten why I’d wanted to write it in the first place. And Jill and Robert had found something in it that meant something to them. So I thought it would be better if they just took it and did what they wanted with it.

And Robert did quite a bit in terms of . . . there’s a travelling photographer in the story, who goes door-to-door and takes pictures of families. Rostotski, who’s this famous photographer from Newfoundland, did that, and came to our door when I was a kid. He was a ventriloquist, actually, and we had this little stuffed monkey and he was making the monkey talk to get us to smile for the picture. It was bizarre. Anyway, I had a family photographer in the story, and Robert made that photographer a much more integrative part of the story of the family. He did a whole bunch of things like that to make it work theatrically. And I thought it was beautiful. I found it really hard to feel connected to it as something that was mine, you know, it felt like another creature altogether—but a really lovely one.

CS: A question that keeps coming up in discussions of Atlantic Canadian writing is the ways Newfoundland conventionally has been depicted in stereotypical terms, you know, as a place that’s locked in the past, or outside of time, a mythic place, a quaint place, a folksy place. So I’m wondering how you see your work fitting into that. Do you see your work playing into some of those representations of Newfoundland, or do you see yourself doing something different?

MC: You know, I’m just trying to make a living. [laughs] I don’t know, that is one of the things that literary critics talk about: that this sense of Newfoundland as a timeless place, or of outport Newfoundland as a place apart from the world, is in some ways doing a disservice to Newfoundland, because it creates the sense that there was a real Newfoundland that no longer exists, and that whatever we have now is some sort of pale shadow of it.

And that’s something that I’ve struggled with in my personal life quite a bit. I always felt a bit like a faux Newfoundlander, you know. I grew up in a mining town nowhere near saltwater, never caught a fish in my life, left Newfoundland to go to Labrador West when I was about fourteen, and then ended up on the mainland for a long time. And my only connection to that world was through my parents’ stories, and my Dad’s stories in particular. He was a great storyteller, and grew up fishing. And I had a real sense that *that* was real Newfoundland and that the world that I grew up in was less so somehow.

I moved home about eleven or twelve years ago, and was a bit apprehensive about it, because I wasn't sure if there was a place there for me. I didn't know if I would fit in. And the beautiful thing about being back there is that I've discovered, of course, that I am Newfoundland, that the world that we have there now is as much Newfoundland as any world has ever been Newfoundland. And that all of these things that I'm writing about in *Galore* are still present in some way. But . . . the world that I grew up in the '60s and '70s is a world that my parents couldn't have imagined growing up in Newfoundland in the '30s and '40s. And the world that my kids are growing up in is a world that I couldn't have imagined growing up in Newfoundland in the '60s and '70s.

So, the real question is, how much of who we were do we carry with us through those changes? And my sense of it is that those stories continue to have a huge influence on who we are—that who I am in the world was shaped by my parents, and that they were shaped by their parents in a particular way. And I think Malcolm Gladwell, in his most recent book,⁴ talks about the ways in which those defining cultural things about a people from a particular place carry on for generations and generations after the physical world that created those characteristics [has] disappeared completely. And I see that in Newfoundland now—that that world that created these people, even though that world is gone, they carry on in it, and that we're still shaped by those things.

So, I'm not sure where my work fits in all that, and it may be that I am just playing into stereotypes. The only negative things ever said about the book in review is that it falls off in the last hundred pages, 'cause the magic kind of disappears, right, and the history starts coming into it—and they're not interested in the history, they want more ghosts.

I was trying to create a real sense of how that otherworldliness, or that place that we think of as outport Newfoundland, is a place that *has* been replaced by the modern world—but that it still runs under the surface. But it's clear that there's some tension there in reviewers' minds about whether or not that's a good thing for a book to be doing.

cs: One thing that connects to this is the way the book plays with the idea of legends and how we as readers see the whale, and Judah being born out of the whale, and all that stuff, but then as we go through the novel and as time continues, the people forget, they forget how he got there, and they forget that he may or may not have blessed them when they caught more fish. I like the way it becomes dim . . . not even memory, it gets lost in time, so in a way

that's kind of what you're describing here, that these stories are there, but they're changing.

MC: Sure. I was also wanting to play with that whole notion of truth versus reality. What's interesting about those stories is not whether or not they're actually true. At a certain point in the book, nobody really remembers Judah coming out of the belly of the whale, no one is alive to have seen that, but the *story* is still present with them. And it's the story that's important. There's a point in the book where Judah just kind of disappears. He's supposedly locked away in this fishing shed, and when they finally go to look for him he's gone, and has been gone a long long time, and nobody ever finds out what happened to him.

And the point I think I was trying to make with that is that whether or not Judah ever existed is irrelevant. What's important about him are the stories about him and the role that the stories play in these people's lives. The fact that he's gone, and may never have been there, and there's no way to know what happened to him, doesn't matter. It's the fact that those stories have shaped people—that is the important thing.

CS: That was the one moment in the book where I wanted more, so I'm glad to hear you talk about that! I also want to ask you a little bit about history, and I know that you've talked about this already in other interviews and various other places, but do you think Newfoundlanders have a different relation to history? I think you may have said that at one point.

MC: Yeah, my sense of it is that they do. I think for a lot of Newfoundlanders, history is not about textbooks, or about great moments, or about elections. That history is more about where your family is from . . . and where your family used to fish and what piece of land they used to own, and there's a real sense that history belongs to people. So they're very possessive of it. And they have a sense of what has happened and what hasn't. And if you tell a story that contradicts them, then they're going to be pretty pissed off about it. So I think writing about history in Newfoundland is a bit of a dicey business.

When I wrote *River Thieves*, which is about events that took place two hundred years ago, but it concerns a particular family, the Peytons, I could not believe how many Peytons I ran into after that book came out. I got to meet a Mr. Edgar Bear. He was 93, and his grandmother knew John Peyton Jr. So I was sitting next to this man, if I held his hand, he held his grandmother's hand, she was holding John Peyton Jr.'s hand. And that was an amazing moment—just to see how close all of that is to the present still.

That it's not something that doesn't exist anymore, it's very present to people in Newfoundland, I think, their sense of ownership of those events—which makes it a fairly dangerous place to be a writer.

cs: So is that sense of the past being so alive playing into your poems in *Hard Light*? I think the opening poem of that collection describes a sense of rupture with the past.

mc: I think that that book was written out of my sense of being disconnected from the world that my parents grew up in. And having a real sense that the world that they grew up in had gone on pretty much unchanged for two or three hundred years, but in the space of their lifetime it had disappeared. The world that Dad grew up in—the '30s and '40s—there were changes, they had electric lights and they had the inboard motor and they had the cod trap. But outside of those things, their daily life was very close to how people had lived in Newfoundland a hundred years before, two hundred years before. And since Confederation with Canada, that world has . . . it just does not exist anymore. You can find people who lived it, but the world itself has changed completely.

And I felt a real sense of . . . well, I didn't want to be nostalgic about it, because it was such a difficult life . . . I remember Dad saying to me one time, talking about fishing on the Labrador, he started when he was nine—although he didn't take on a full share of the crew until he was eleven, he said, he had it easy for the first two years—and he said to me, "Oh, you would never have managed it." And what he meant was, I think, that because I knew a different world, that I would never have been able to live that way. People survived that world partly because they knew nothing different.

He moved to Buchans, to the mining town, because he had quit school at 15, his father had died, he took over the family fishery, was two hundred dollars in debt after two seasons, through connections got a job at a mining town, planning to pay off his debt and then go back to fishing right away. But there was no way he was going back to fishing after two years where there were heated buildings and a paycheque every two weeks regardless of the weather, and a bowling alley and a hockey rink and a movie theatre—it was like stepping into a time machine.

So I didn't want to be nostalgic about that world, but I had a real sense that it was a way of life that had gone on for a long time and now was gone. So there was that sense of rupture for *me*.

cs: Do you ever feel pressured to write a particular kind of Newfoundland novel that conjures a sense of Newfoundland "essence" or "authenticity?"⁵

MC: I certainly don't feel any pressure in that sense. I would say, in fact, that I feel more pressure to move away from the kind of work that I've been doing towards something more contemporary. I think the biggest criticism I get is that I'm writing about a world that doesn't exist anymore, and that I should . . . listen to rock and roll, for god's sake. [*laughs*] I mean, I never wanted to be a writer of historical fiction. It's just that those stories interested me, or it felt like those stories chose me as opposed to I chose those stories. I would love to write something that had less to do with the past and more to do with the world as it is today. But I also feel like I'm writing what I have in me to write. I've never made a conscious decision to write a story or not write a story because it fits or doesn't fit somebody's notion of what's right or wrong, and I think everybody in Newfoundland now is doing that. You look at books like *Come, Thou Tortoise* by Jessica Grant or the stuff that Lisa Moore and Michael Winter are doing which are über-modern in their approach to the whole notion of writing and what writing is and what it can do. They're cutting edge, but those stories couldn't have come from anywhere else but Newfoundland.

CS: Are there any Atlantic Canadian writers that have been a particular influence on your work?

MC: My favourite writers change constantly. It used to bother me that a lot of my favourite writers, when I come back to them after five or ten years, seem to suck [*laughs*] . . . or they don't interest me in the way that they did. As a writer who's reading, at different points in your life you're looking for different things or you're after different things and so it's not that the books change so much as *you* change, and the book doesn't speak to you in the same way. But there have been a number of Atlantic writers who were really big for me, especially early on. I'm thinking about poets like Alden Nowlan and Al Pittman who were huge for me when I was starting out because they were writing about a place that I recognized. Most of the writers that I first read were people living in places that I'd only seen in movies or read about in papers, so it was really important to have those writers writing about a recognizable landscape for me. Alistair MacLeod was a huge influence and some of David Adams Richards' early novels.

CS: Is it important to you to capture a sense of Newfoundland speech in your work?

MC: It's a really dicey thing writing in dialect, and it's often done very badly. I've always been really wary of doing it badly. I lived in Ontario for quite a while, and a lot of people would say to me, "How come you don't have an accent?"

As if there is *an* accent in Newfoundland. I mean, there are hundreds of accents in Newfoundland. One of the things that I try to do in my writing is to give a sense of people speaking in a way that is unique to a particular place or a particular character without having it come off sounding like a cartoon. Part of what I avoid is writing that drops *th*'s or drops *h*'s. I've never done that, I don't think. What I'm after instead is a particular cadence, and there is a very unique cadence to Newfoundland speech. Part of the cadence is where people place particular parts of speech in a sentence. Grammarians would say it's incorrect usage. But part of Newfoundland speech, part of the cadence of it, is using those things where they don't belong, for lack of a better word, and those are the kinds of things that I'm trying to play with when I'm writing dialogue. Especially in a book like *Galore*, I really wanted to give a sense that these people don't speak standard English and that how they speak is unique to the place they come from. But I have never written a narrative voice in dialect. I know that Joel Hynes's first book *Down to the Dirt* is written in Newfoundland dialect and it's a fantastic job. It's completely convincing. But often when people try to do that it just comes across as clunky and cartoonish somehow, so it's a very tricky thing.

cs: People talk about the explosion of Newfoundland writing in the last decade or two, with writers like Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, yourself, and Wayne Johnston, and I'm wondering if you see yourself as part of this cultural movement, if it is a cultural movement, and what you think it might be attributed to.

mc: Well . . . I can't really explain what's going on, in terms of the number of writers that are coming out of Newfoundland—and the number of really, really, really good writers—world-class writers. I mean, the population of Newfoundland is about the same as the population of Hamilton—and, I don't want to put Hamilton down, it's a fine city . . . And it's not just writing. Writing is the most visible one, but just in terms of the amount of cultural product that's coming out of Newfoundland in the last twenty years or so . . . I think a lot of it may have to do with the cultural shift that's going on. I think Newfoundland's in the midst of a real sea change, that Newfoundland now is completely different than it was twenty years ago, and it's going to be completely different five years, ten years from now. And there's a particular kind of energy, I think, that comes out of that kind of sea change.

We're also seeing now the first generation of Newfoundlanders who are university-educated, you know, just as a matter of course. So I think that there are people coming out of a culture that had been almost exclusively an

oral culture, who are now writing things down for the first time—and that there's a freshness or a depth to the writing that's coming out that may be related to something like that.

But, you know, I dropped out of my PhD for a reason . . . so I wouldn't have to answer these kinds of questions! [*laughs*]

NOTES

- 1 In *Galore*, a man emerges from the belly of a beached whale. The townspeople christen him “Judah” because there is some argument about whether the biblical character who is swallowed by the whale is named Jonah or Judas. They decide on a combination of the two names.
- 2 Bromhidrosis is a medical condition marked by extreme body odour.
- 3 The Ship Inn is a well-known pub in downtown St. John's.
- 4 Crummey is referring to Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 book *Outliers*, which examines various inherited environmental determinants that contribute to an individual's abilities.
- 5 This and the next two questions emerged during the audience question period at the Congress. I have condensed the questions; the answers are those provided by Crummey during the discussion period.

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