

A Conversation on Three Recent Works of Fiction

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REVIEW ESSAY

A Conversation on Three Recent Works of Fiction

TOM HALFORD

Samuel Thomas Martin. *A Blessed Snarl*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2012.
ISBN 978-1-55081-381-4

Chad Pelley. *Every Little Thing*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2013.
ISBN 978-1-55081-405-7

Russell Wangersky. *Whirl Away*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2012.
ISBN 978-0-88762-936-5

I once heard a St. John's novelist say that there were not enough critics in this city who were willing to seriously criticize fellow authors; it was too small a community and he believed that writers were afraid to review their friends' novels. I asked him which writers he would criticize. He smirked and looked at me as though I hadn't been listening.

Criticism is a vital process for authorial development and growth. Sometimes it sings and sometimes it attacks, but it is always a worthwhile challenge. Either you get better or you get worse and writers need to be pushed if they are going to improve on their previous work. Unfortunately, the challenge that criticism offers is not always heard. Some writers feel wounded or misunderstood, and they fail to take into consideration the critic's observations. Even a positive review might be dismissed as the prerogative of one optimistic eccentric. The more I think about

it, this St. John's novelist smirked at my innocent curiosity for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, I want to adopt a potential resolution to these problems. My theoretical framework derives from Wayne C. Booth's concept of coduction, which attempts to produce a consensus among informed and thoughtful readers. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, he describes its meaning:

from co ("together") and ducere ("to lead, draw out, bring, bring out"). Coduction will be what we do whenever we say to the world (or prepare ourselves to say): "Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced comparing my experience with other more or less qualified observers, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker) ones, or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons." Every such statement implicitly calls for continuing conversation: "How does my coduction compare with yours?" (Booth, 72-73).

Booth uses coduction to discuss canonical works, but I will tweak his concept to review the novels of two young authors, Samuel Thomas Martin's *A Blessed Snarl* and Chad Pelley's *Every Little Thing*. Although Martin and Pelley are potential literary stars, they still need some time to refine their craft and they need people who are willing to offer honest opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of their work. Russell Wangersky's *Whirl Away* will highlight the fact that even for an established author the creation of a truly wonderful text is an extremely delicate act. Coduction is only meant to be part of a larger discussion, not a definitive statement on an author's work. If critics are nervous about offering challenges to young writers, then exciting novels such as *A Blessed Snarl* and *Every Little Thing* might not receive the attention they deserve. Coduction is a relatively simple process of examining texts by comparing one's own responses to what has already been said about these authors. My wager is that a focus on a conversational and a convivial tone is the most appropriate style when critiquing a friend's work.

Samuel Thomas Martin is a friend of mine. Any of my comments on *A Blessed Snarl* are influenced by that friendship, but I believe we have been the type of friends who have told each other what we honestly think. By having completed his Ph.D. at Memorial University, published two books, and landed a teaching position in Iowa before he turned thirty, Martin has serious literary credentials. He is the type of author you want to root for, a sincere believer in the power of the written word and a loyal defender of his fellow writers. The strength of *A Blessed Snarl* lies in Martin's sharp descriptions and his brightly

envisioned characters. Some critics have questioned the organization of the plot, but I found the unique web of imagery to be one of the story's most compelling qualities. My only challenge is about influence and I make it with hesitation. I know that Martin reveres the great Canadian author, David Adams Richards. I wonder if he needs to evaluate how that influence has affected his writing and whether his strengths as an author might not be fully realized until he has wrestled with the influence of his literary hero.

A few critics have noted the unorthodox structure of *A Blessed Snarl*. Martin's novel asks to be read in a unique way, with a greater focus on threading imagery together than on enjoying a more traditional story arc of climaxes and resolutions. Writing for *Quill & Quire*, Alex Good says, "Despite the lack of a strong central story, the narrative skips along in a manner that is odd but effective." Do not open this novel expecting a straightforward plot. Instead, Martin's narrative works as a web of interconnecting images and themes, such as those of fire and betrayal. Two main storylines run through *A Blessed Snarl*. One thread begins with the failing marriage of Patrick Wiseman and his wife Ann, who have recently moved to Newfoundland from Ontario. The narrative gradually shifts to focus on their son Hab and his equally fraught relationship with Natalie. This movement between the two story arcs did not inhibit my reading experience, but created a complex interplay between these four characters that encouraged me to compare them with each other. Some readers have found the unorthodox structure mildly frustrating, however. The sole criticism Steph VanderMeulen, writing at *Bella's Bookshelves*, has to offer concerns this untraditional plot structure:

I would have liked to have read more about Patrick, especially as the novel begins with him and leans heavily toward him in the first part. This focus swings to rest on Hab, Natalie, and Gerry, and as such the novel felt somewhat unbalanced, but Patrick's story does come to a sort of resolution.

VanderMeulen makes a fair point. For me, however, Patrick's journey is about persistence and devotion to his wife rather than any kind of resolution. Readers might want a definite reconciliation, but Martin refuses easy answers. Instead of a traditionally structured novel, he offers a web of imagery and symbolism that is a fresh and exciting way of telling a story.

Although I enjoyed *A Blessed Snarl*, I want to present a challenge to Martin. In the summer of 2012, we made a road trip to New Brunswick for a conference

on Atlantic Canadian literature. He wanted to visit his former teacher, David Adams Richards, and I tagged along. Martin reveres David Adams Richards and deservedly so. With his bursts of poetic language, however, Martin's sentences are more reminiscent of a younger Steven Heighton than of Richards. The unique power of Richards's writing derives from an intersection of well-wrought characters and of perfect plotting. A weight of foreboding builds in a novel by Richards. His narratives are developed in such a way that the combined personalities of his characters lead inevitably to violent conclusions. I witness personal destruction in his work, sometimes even a type of Maritime martyrdom. In *A Blessed Snarl*, violence arrives more as a plot device. The challenge I present to Martin situates him at a crossroad. He stands in one direction to truly devote himself to following the path of the literary master Richards, or to following his own unique voyage, down an altogether new set of peaks and valleys. In no way is *A Blessed Snarl* derivative of Richards's work, but there is an influence operating on Martin's writing alien to his own ethic. I think he needs to wrestle with his influences as he continues to master his craft.

Chad Pelley's *Every Little Thing* might have benefited from a re-examination of one of his literary heroes, also. He cites Michael Winter's *This All Happened* as the reason he began writing. Structural similarities between *Every Little Thing* and Winter's *The Architects Are Here* include: a traumatic boating scene, a death that looms over the narrative, and a love triangle that creates tension between the protagonists and their girlfriends. Despite these similarities, Pelley's writing differs from Winter's in one important way: Winter's style is minimalist and taut in the mould of Norman Levine, whereas Pelley's prose teems with metaphor and simile. Like Martin, Pelley is a promising literary artist, but of a slightly different breed. *Every Little Thing* is his second novel and he runs one of the finest blogs on the Internet. I do not know Chad Pelley personally but I am a fan of *Salty Ink*, which I check regularly to gauge his opinions on Atlantic Canadian literature. His strength as a writer lies in his ability to sustain the plot and to develop a likable central character, such as Cohen Davies in *Every Little Thing*, but he needs to seriously evaluate his stylistic choices and to consider whether he wants to create characters who are likable or characters who are challenging.

Every Little Thing has received a considerable amount of attention, and not all of it has been positive. Philip Marchand complains in the *National Post* that "We are still interested in Cohen's fate almost to the very end, but the interest is weakened both by improbable characterization and a narrative that is over-burdened with visual detail and odd metaphor" (Marchand, 10). Although

there are people like Pelley's Keith Stone in this world, they are caricatured in *Every Little Thing*. Marchand's criticism, however, does not fully take into account the way the story is presented. One unfortunate incident after another besets Davies; thus, Pelley has created a novel that borders on farce. The lively character of Stone, in contrast to Davies's hapless, good-guy persona, is the perfect foil to push the narrative forward. The characterizations might be improbable, but the reader is asked to enter a wistful world, as Russell Wangersky describes on the back of the book. If we demand a strictly realistic narrative, we will be frustrated. On the other hand, if we accept the book on its own terms, then we can appreciate Pelley's novel with a strong hero and a slimy villain. I do wonder, however, if some of this confusion over characterization could have been avoided if *Every Little Thing* had been written in the first person rather than in what feels like an awkward and biased narrative voice.

Marchand's second complaint about the overuse of metaphor is justified since it creates unnecessary distraction and confuses Pelley's descriptions. Pelley might respond that metaphor and simile bring his prose to life, and generally they do, but too many of his sentences need to be cut or edited. He writes of his creative process:

One sitdown with Michael Crummey proved particularly revolutionary for me . . . I'll paraphrase, but he said something like, "I'm not sure about adverbs and adjectives. It's possible that everywhere you use them is an opportunity for a more lively and descriptive sentence." He was right, and my writing's exploded with life and colour ever since. (Pelley, 6)

I agree with Pelley to an extent. Several moments in *Every Little Thing* made me pause to enjoy how he had crafted a sentence. But there were also moments where he could have restrained himself. This scene, in particular, gave me pause:

A cloud of smoke, too thick to see through, billowed up from the barbecue and clawed at his eyes. He ran from the thing like it was an angry beehive, and his eyes were red as boiled lobsters. They were spilling water, like cracked aquariums. (68)

This scene highlights a stylistic problem. Too much is happening. I can imagine and feel the smoke after I read the word "claw." The beehive, the lobster, and the cracked aquarium confuse the original image and they distract from the incident.

Perhaps Pelley has so many tools at his disposal that he might have found it hard not to showcase the extent of his ability, but I think he will be a stronger writer with a little more reserve.

The final point I want to make about *Every Little Thing* involves Pelley's finely crafted plot. People will read his writing because he knows how to develop a story. The novel begins with Davies in prison, but the details of his crime are withheld until near the conclusion. The plot turns on several moments of fully realized tension and suspense. Elements of *Every Little Thing* remind me of Lynn Coady's *The Antagonist* since both novels feature the voyeuristic allure of reading to discover the protagonist's terrible act and both characters become victims of their own good intentions. Like Rank's transgression in *The Antagonist*, however, I was not completely satisfied when I found out the crime Davies committed. After 200-some pages of waiting to learn about a traumatic incident, I expect to be stunned by what happened and I want to be shocked by what I have assumed about the protagonist. As a character Davies is well-written and I genuinely enjoyed hanging out with him as I read, but a truly great character needs to present a deeper challenge. I want to be simultaneously drawn in and repulsed, to feel as though I understand him, but also to know that there is still mystery, some alien quality that fascinates. Like Martin, Pelley is refining his craft but provides much to impress the reader with his work. The wistful, quasi-farcical world he has created in *Every Little Thing* is enjoyable and diverting, but I know from the stronger moments in this novel that he is capable of developing a more challenging literary experience.

Russell Wangersky's *Whirl Away* met a successful reception last year. He was shortlisted for the Scotia Bank Giller Prize and Mark Anthony Jarman's review in the *Globe and Mail* compares him to John Cheever and Alice Munro. What strikes me about this collection is not that he is in the same league as Cheever or Munro, but how well the stories work as a full experience. I found myself enthralled by each violent and dark tale. When I grew tired of the repeated traumas in this short collection, I reached "Sharp Corner," which is about a man who is thrilled by the gruesome accidents he sees from his house. His wife tells him, "You enjoy it too much. . . . All these horrible things that happened to other people" (Wangersky, 158). An ironic interplay between this scene and the other stories complicated the way I thought about the entire book. Furthermore, the strength of the concluding work, "I Like," might not be completely clear without the rest of the collection setting a gloomy, world-weary tone. The complex final paragraphs were startling in their duplicity. Without spoiling this moment for other readers, I can say that they initially left me feeling happy for the couple in

the story, but after having set the book down I started to think about the scene and I wondered if there was a denser experience than I was first able to discern. If even the slightest detail of this collection had been changed or reorganized, *Whirl Away* would not have possessed the same power it held over me. *Whirl Away* has a brittle magic and conjures a world unto itself.

I am not going to rank these three texts, but I think the way I have discussed them reveals my idiosyncratic taste and, more importantly, the effect produced by the reading experience. All three writers are talented in unique ways and each work has its own magic. With Martin, the incredible web of imagery and the stunning level of detail make *A Blessed Snarl* an intense and a rewarding experience. Pelley's *Every Little Thing* is high entertainment and his lead character, Cohen Davies, is easy to like. *Whirl Away* is an altogether different experience that I think both Martin and Pelley are capable of developing, if not surpassing.

I hope that my comments contribute to what has already been written on these texts and that others will express their own opinions on one or all three of these authors. Let's keep this conversation going. Has friendship enhanced or impaired my judgement? Can we be friends?

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