

Gemma Hickey. *Almost Feral*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-55081-777-5

Craig Jennex

Volume 36, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092572ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092572ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Jennex, C. (2021). Review of [Gemma Hickey. *Almost Feral*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-55081-777-5]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 36(2), 321–323. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092572ar>

© Craig Jennex, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>



This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Gemma Hickey. *Almost Feral*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-55081-777-5

In *Almost Feral*, Gemma Hickey, who fought for non-binary and gender-neutral documents from government institutions, chronicles their 908-kilometre walk across Newfoundland to raise awareness for The Pathways Foundation, an organization they founded to support Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who have been abused within religious institutions. The sheer span of the journey described in the book is remarkable, but what is particularly moving about *Almost Feral* is the intimate perspective readers gain into the life of one of Canada's most important activists. A former president of Egale Canada who played a foundational role in the legalization of same-sex marriage and an ardent supporter of LGBTQ2+ people and victims of clergy sexual abuse, Hickey is someone we should know and whose tireless work we should celebrate. This book allows readers to know them, their journey, and to better understand the wisdom they gained along the way.

Almost Feral is part memoir, part autobiography, and part travelogue. While Hickey's trek across Newfoundland frames the book's narrative, the progress of the journey is regularly paused through detailed recollections of past desires and experiences. These memories, interspersed among chapters describing the walk, are woven together to contextualize the contemporary physical and emotional journey. By the end of the book, we've followed Hickey as they move across the island, from Port aux Basques to St. John's, but so too have we followed them as they move across time, memories, gender, and sexual identity.

To be sure, Hickey's journey is important for LGBTQ2+ historians and activists to follow — their activist work has broken open previously uncharted paths — and readers are often introduced to people who have found personal success and a greater sense of self by following in Hickey's footsteps. Simultaneously, readers are introduced to the people who broke paths for Hickey and equipped them with the strength to continue moving forward in the face of sexual violence, religious discrimination, and traditions that seem to invalidate their

desires. These characters include family members who seem prescient and whose words, Hickey writes, have long served as a warm quilt in which they can wrap themselves. Hickey's kin appear alongside well-known figures like Maude Barlow, whose activist wisdom helped Hickey develop their own, and Joey Smallwood, who walked across Newfoundland decades before Hickey to similarly bring attention to political movements and the transformative possibilities enabled through collective action.

Almost Feral is an intimate and compelling book that is well-suited for courses on gender and sexuality (especially those that focus on Canadian contexts) as well as courses on non-fiction, memoir, and Canadian history. One chapter, "Apples and Oranges," strikes me as particularly useful for teaching in introductory courses on gender and sexuality in Canada. Hickey opens this chapter by describing time spent in a psychiatric ward following a suicide attempt at 16, writes about being spat on by anti-gay zealots in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and recalls speaking to politicians about LGBTQ2+ rights in the early years of the twenty-first century. This chapter is a great example of the fraught political climate in the early 2000s (one that, while not that long ago, might seem like ancient history to some undergraduate students who have only ever known a nation that permitted same-sex marriages and uses every opportunity to claim ostensible LGBTQ2+ equality). With a transcript of Hickey's remarks to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in 2003, this chapter provides students with primary source material evidence of this cultural moment. In fact, Hickey's commitment to intertextuality — weaving together different genres of texts to create something greater than its parts — makes the historicizing in this book particularly compelling. Throughout *Almost Feral*, Hickey introduces concepts and tensions that would be useful for undergraduate students to wrestle with: the ongoing violence of colonialism in the land we call Canada; the way that categories, identities, and binaries will always fail; the lure of wildness that provides a way out of the normative social logics under which we exist; and much more.

On the first day of their walk across Newfoundland, Hickey played Amelia Curran's song "Coming for You" on their iPod. Hickey writes, of hearing that song on the first day of their Herculean journey: "I leaned into the wind, my pace strong and steady" (19). Curran's song is prophetic of the journey that Hickey chronicles in this book. Lyrically, the song is about preserving and continuing to move forward in the face of forces pulling or pushing you back. What's more, though, is that both Curran's song and Hickey's text are at their most beautiful when unexpected moments of collectivity and communal care provide harmony and forward motion. In the chorus of "Coming for You," multiple voices join hers to provide sonic support to her refrain; in Hickey's chronicle, they are consistently coming into contact with friends, family members, and strangers whose stories provide strength and support for the exhausting journey. Both remind us that our lives — our individual journeys — are at their richest, their most transformative and productive, when we find connection and care with others.

Craig Jennex
Ryerson University