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“Flawed Splendour”: A Conversation with Lynn Coady

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY RACHEL STEEVES

CAPE BRETON NATIVE LYNN COADY contributes a unique voice to the literature of the Maritime region, one that is immediately distinctive within the context of Cape Breton writing and stands in opposition to the depiction of place presented by an earlier generation of writers. In his article “To the Lighthouse ... Or Maybe Not,” R.M. Vaughan states that Coady’s “body of work ... positions her as the anti-Alistair MacLeod”; he goes on to outline some of the familiar stereotypes that surround the literature of Cape Breton. Her novels contain “no stoic, hardbitten natural poets ennobled by grinding poverty, no long-suffering seamen’s wives wandering the harbours wrapped in shawls and seaweed, no toothless fiddlers full of gingery wisdom” (13). Coady, Vaughan asserts, “smartly leaves that nonsense to the lighthouse-haunting romantics” (13). Although undoubtedly informed by the writing of other generations of Maritime authors, Coady’s own writing reflects a deep anxiety about common literary and social tendencies that idealize and oversimplify the Maritime region. In his critical article “As for Me and Me Arse: Strategic Regionalism and the Home Place in Lynn Coady’s *Strange Heaven*,” Herb Wyile writes that Lynn Coady’s fiction “provides a good example of Atlantic-Canadian literature’s increasing and subversive self-consciousness, foregrounding and deconstructing the way in which Canada’s eastern edge tends to be framed from outside” (85). While this is a sound assertion, it can be taken even further: Coady’s fiction resists “the way in which Canada’s eastern edge [has been] framed” from without and from within. Coady’s fiction resists the way in which the “eastern edge” has framed itself.

In order to deconstruct idyllic myths that inform the fiction and marketing of the Maritimes, Coady creates a new vision of the region — a vision that is deeply informed by gender, and managed through

a keen sense of humour. In doing this, Coady has written two novels set in Cape Breton — *Strange Heaven* (1998) and *Saints of Big Harbour* (2002) — and one, *Mean Boy* (2006), set in New Brunswick, addressing more broadly the myths that inform Maritime identity. She currently lives in Toronto, Ontario. This conversation took place on 23 October, 2006, in Rothesay, New Brunswick.

RS How have your experiences of regional decline affected your portrayal of the reality that you see in the Maritimes, and specifically in Cape Breton?

LC I grew up in Cape Breton in the eighties, which was a real arsehole of a time in particular for my family. When you're young you don't really understand the economic pressures and the history. You don't realize that you're riding out a given wave: the economy and the politics of the time and place you're in. Early in the eighties, my family went bankrupt. My dad was a small businessman and interest rates shot up and kind of sent everything to hell. Port Hawkesbury was such a weird place because it had been this boomtown in the seventies and all these industries shot up in this tiny little town, and people just moved there by the boatload. My dad had been working for Ontario Hydro, where he met my mom in North Ontario; he moved back because it was the place to be. And then, overnight, everything went to hell. All of the industry shut down again. And then my dad — who had built up a pretty good living as a small businessman — his businesses went under. That always stuck in my mind about what it meant to be from Cape Breton, and that was my personal experience of regional decline. Juxtaposed against the elegiac and bucolic depictions of the Maritimes, it always felt very ironic to me because of those experiences and because of what a hole Port Hawkesbury was. I've never really bought into the soft-lensed depictions of the Maritimes because that hasn't been my own experience. In fact, when I've come up against those depictions, they have always rung false to me.

RS How have other Cape Breton writers affected your writing?

LC I was reading Cape Breton writers who were very brilliant — Alistair MacLeod and Hugh MacLennan and those guys — but I wasn't seeing my own experiences reflected at all. Maybe slightly, in some of the grittier stuff. I remember reading MacLennan's *Each Man's Son* in high school, which is pretty impressive when I think about it,

because we didn't really read a lot of Canadian writers in high school, and we certainly didn't read a lot of Atlantic Canadian writers. *Each Man's Son* got across that bleak industrial grittiness, which I responded to. In general, it was more landscape, and I think that Canadian writing in general was a bit more landscape.

RS I've read that you're a big David Adams Richards fan. You couldn't see your experiences in much of the writing of Cape Breton, but you did see some of your experiences in the writing of someone like Richards?

LC Yeah, it's funny. Most of the Cape Breton and Maritime writers were male, and I hadn't seen anything that reflected my experiences as a female in the Maritimes, or more specifically, in small town Cape Breton. But I kind of did see myself in some of the novels by David Adams Richards, particularly in a novel called *Blood Ties*, which was written from a female point of view. I remember my mind being blown by how accurate it was. Even his other novels: they're written in the third person and he has really strong female characters. Richards doesn't have that soft-lensed view. He was really hard-nosed and he depicted unrepentant alcoholics and people just sort of screwing up their lives because they don't know how else to behave; and all with a very subtle yet very piquant humour. That really inspired me as well.

RS I want to talk about some traditional characteristics of Cape Breton fiction, specifically the idea of a "blood-soil." In *Strange Heaven*, Bridget returns to her town, her life and her family with a certain indifferent acceptance. There is no dramatic idea of a "blood soil" like there is in the fiction of someone like MacLeod; Bridget is by no means bound to the land. I want to talk about some of the things that bind your characters to the region — and to each other — without that traditional idea of a blood soil.

LC That's a good question, because I don't know. That's something that I think I have reacted to — or maybe reacted against — on some level in those novels. I think that maybe that comes out of being an adoptee, so I don't really know anything about my blood, as it were. My brothers, except for my younger one, are all adopted as well, so it has never really been something that was discussed in my family. We all knew we were adopted, but no one made a big deal about it. That whole idea of blood ties or a 'blood-soil' is part and parcel with the idealized

view of Cape Breton as a region, or the Maritimes as a region, and I don't know that I buy it. And yet, I will admit that there is something — human beings have feelings for places and for people — but I don't necessarily buy that they are endemic or encoded into our genes. I don't have an alternative for you. I don't know why we have these feelings that we do, but it's a question that has always interested me and I think that I have addressed it — maybe not overtly — but as part of the subtext in my writing.

RS In 1999, you wrote an article in the *New Brunswick Reader* entitled “No Place Like Home,” where you talked about a certain regional mentality that can be damaging to young creative types. In *Mean Boy*, Larry views knowledge and learning as his ticket out of the region; how does *Mean Boy* showcase a regional inability to break free from romanticized ideals?

LC *Mean Boy* is all about illusionment rather than disillusionment. Well, actually it's about disillusionment, but you have to start out with the illusion before you can be disillusioned. Some people in Toronto are idealizing PEI as this beautiful, wonderful place where people are simple and good to each other and bound to the earth in some fundamental way. Meanwhile, Larry is like, “Oh, my Jesus, I need to get out of here, because people are *simple*.” He sees it in a completely negative way. Larry idealizes university and the life of the mind: the world of arts and letters is this exalted place where people aren't mean-spirited or petty, people aren't going to dismiss him just for being a wussy, which he is. These are people with bigger souls and broader ideas, so he figures that as soon as he gets off of PEI and into the world of the university, he'll just be stepping into the life of the mind. He'll fit right in; he'll have instant mental communion with all of the great minds, and he'll belong. I think we all look towards something else for that kind of belonging. It comes out of my own experiences: that's pretty much what I thought or hoped would happen once I got out of Cape Breton. That's what growing up is all about really, that disillusionment and realizing that once you get out of one place that is flawed and has things about it that drive you crazy, you end up somewhere else and realize that it's basically the same. Like when Larry finds out that poetry is high school, and he's just left high school. It's the most horrifying thing that you could possibly say to him at that point.

RS In *Saints of Big Harbour*, you show, through the development

of Isadore Aucoin, exactly how harmful an unworthy idealized subject can be, particularly in a section of the text in which Alison comes to his senses regarding Isadore's true colours. You write,

Isadore simply struck Alison as being more tuned in than he was, as having a more fundamental, primal connection to the world around him....

A voice spoke up in Alison.... Maybe, it said, maybe you are wrong about Isadore. Maybe Isadore is nothing but an ugly-minded, dirt-ignorant hick and you have been kidding yourself all along.... He couldn't be wrong about Isadore, because Isadore had somehow evolved into Alison's single ethical foothold in the world. (217-18)

Did you develop Isadore's character with the dangers of regional idealization in mind?

LC It's so dangerous to idealize anything, or anyone, or any place, because it gives that thing or person or place a kind of permission to not have to change, and not have to evolve. It encourages us to bury our heads in the sand, or in values that are really morally neutral but that we pretend are moral goods: tradition, community and family for example. That's definitely the case with Isadore. I constructed Isadore as an avatar of the kind of being that people just idealize for no good reason. For example, Isadore is big. That's his first virtue and one that has gotten him a lot, and it's just so arbitrary. He's just a big guy, so people think he's important, people think he's strong, people think he's noble, and so on. Isadore just laps that kind of unmerited approval up, and it ends up ruining him because he decides somewhere along the way that he must be worthy of it. He never has to do anything, he never has to put himself out there for other people; it always has to be about him.

RS Your novels have been increasingly satirical. Is this something that you are going to continue to develop? Does your next novel have a satirical aim?

LC I guess it's a kind of satire. I can talk about my new book because I just finished it. It's satire more in the Orwellian sense; it's not actually overtly funny. There aren't any big belly laughs, really. It's a pretty broad-based satire about family. I'm going all the way back to my adoption issues and themes. It's about the way we construct ideals of family, what family means, and then how we kind of graph them onto whatever reality we construct. It's about a family of adoptees and how

this ideal of family ends up destroying them because they cling to it so strongly. So it's a kind of satire, but it's not actually a funny satire.

RS In an interview that you did for *The Danforth Review*, you were asked a question to the effect of, "Where's the sex in your novels?" to which you replied that as a Cape Breton Catholic, you begin to bleed from your palms when you approach the keyboard with those kinds of thoughts. I want to talk about sexuality in *Mean Boy*. There is a strong homoerotic element in the novel; was that something that you developed in order to add to the confused nature of Larry's character? Is it something that goes hand in hand with the level of idolization that these young people have for their mentors in creative writing programs?

LC Well, there is that, for sure. I think that in the novel if Jim had ever said, "Let's hit the sheets," Larry would be okay with that because he adores him so much. He wouldn't even pause to think about what his sexual orientation might be. When I was writing the book, I was actually really unsure about Larry's sexuality myself. Because Larry has sort of reconciled himself to the idea that poetry is a sort of feminine pursuit, he's probably more open than most guys of that sort of time and place to the idea that maybe he is gay. I thought that while I was writing it that maybe he was gay; I thought that his whole rivalry with Claude was a little bit sexually charged, and in my mind Claude was actually gay, although that never comes out in the novel. There's also something satirical happening because there is so much masculine posturing going on in the novel, and it's a satire of that time in Atlantic Canadian arts and letters when there was indeed a lot of masculine posturing going on in terms of what it meant to be a writer and what it meant to be a poet. It's all a big pissing contest, really. Any kinds of overt displays of masculinity have that homoerotic subtext because it's always about, "What do the men think of me? Am I making myself impressive amongst my fellow men?" I just found all of that funny, and the homoerotic subtext was a kind of inevitable subtext of the book, I think.

RS Your fiction resists the way that women have been marginalized as the 'other,' or trivialized in the earlier, mythologizing literature of the Maritime region. In *Strange Heaven*, you offer readers a completely unsentimental view of the female body. How do you approach writing about the body?

LC I think that I have male and female novels, in some ways. I

think of *Strange Heaven* and the book I just finished as my female novels, and *Saints* and *Mean Boy* as my male novels. When I think of the body, I'm typically thinking female, which is sort of a traditional archetypal thing to do, but it's also an innate thing in my psyche. It all comes back to the idea of what's real and what's not; that seems to be what we've ended up talking about today, the ideal versus the real. In my last book — and these were issues that were in *Strange Heaven*, too — if there is one thing that is idealized in this world, it's motherhood, women's bodies, and the whole thing that takes place when we give birth. Motherhood, as an experience and as a biological activity, is real. My new book is about a girl who lives in suburbia in a really unreal world, in a lot of ways. She starts riding her bike everywhere, and when she rides her bike she feels closer to what's really going on outside. She finds it very different from being in a car: she's used to being driven around everywhere. She just notes the way that the trees kind of lean toward the road, the cracks in the sidewalk, the grass; she can smell stuff, bugs, and she thinks, "Everything is alive after all. The world's a place of mud and blood." And then she thinks, "And that's what you are, too," thinking about herself. I guess a lot of my books have just been about getting under all of the bullshit around everything it is to be human. There is so much bullshit around motherhood and childbirth, and the innate beauty of it. It goes back to the same thing that we were saying about the idealization of places, like Cape Breton and Nova Scotia, and how there is something profound and inevitably human and inescapable that takes place in our blood. All of my books kind of end up as my way of saying that I don't know if I buy it. That's not to say I don't; I'm just saying that I don't know, and that it's worth looking at. That's what I'm thinking about when I write about the body: where does the body stop and the bullshit begin, basically.

RS In *Saints of Big Harbour*, Guy mocks Alison Mason relentlessly throughout, explaining to readers that "everyone has always said that Alison Mason is an amazingly large fruit.... It seems likely" (323). Alison is perceived as "an amazingly large fruit" because he "is an English teacher and plays a Russian ukulele, reads poetry to us and makes us read it back to him out loud, telling us to feel the words in our mouths and then — I don't think he even knows he's doing it — makes as if his mouth is full of something" (323). Was Alison Mason an inspiration for *Mean Boy*?

LC Yeah, probably a little. I always wanted to get across that glimmer of hope; *Strange Heaven* and *Saints Of Big Harbour* were very much novels that reflected my own teenage experience, and how devoid that experience was of any glimmers of artistic hope. I didn't know any writers, I didn't know any painters, I didn't know anyone who was serious about artistic pursuits, and for me that's always what represents hope. It might not be for Guy, necessarily. I don't know if Guy really has any artistic yearnings; hope for him is embodied in the idea of difference, and the idea that there is something else other than what he's had forced upon him as the prevailing values of where he lives, and that's what Alison Mason kind of represents. Even though Alison is an amazingly large fruit, all that means is that he's not like everybody else. He's this way because this is how he's grown up, and he's from a different place, and he knows different people who have different ways of thinking, and that's all very hopeful. *Mean Boy* is sort of the depiction of the world of Alison Mason in some ways; the world that Alison Mason actually comes from, in all of its flawed splendour.

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