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An Equal-Opportunity Satirist: An Interview with Edward Riche

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY HERB WYILE

NOVELIST, SCREENWRITER, AND PLAYWRIGHT Edward Riche is one of Canada's most versatile and funny writers. Born in the small town of Botwood in northeastern Newfoundland, Riche grew up in suburban St. John's and studied at Memorial University before switching into film studies at Concordia University in Montreal. Returning to St. John's to ply his trade as a writer, Riche published his first novel, *Rare Birds*, in 1997, and in 2001 the novel was adapted into a feature film (starring William Hurt, Molly Parker and Andy Jones), for which Riche wrote the screenplay. Riche also wrote the screenplay for the National Film Board-produced *Secret Nation*, a 1992 feature film about a conspiracy behind Newfoundland joining Confederation. *The Nine Planets* (2004), Riche's second novel, was the winner of the Winterset Award and the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award. Riche has also written two plays, *Possible Maps* and *List of Lights*, and has written extensively for television and radio, including scripts for CBC Radio's *The Great Eastern* and *Sunny Days and Nights*, and the CBC Television comedy show *Made in Canada*. Riche currently lives in St. John's, where we talked in July of 2007.

HW I wonder if we could start by talking a bit about your background. You grew up in St. John's, I take it?

ER Yes. I was born in Botwood, a town in the Bay of Exploits on the northeast coast, but I spent no time there at all. I spent most of my life in suburban St. John's. I went to university here, and studied chemistry for three years, then switched to film school at Concordia University. That was probably the most formative experience, because I went into it rather impulsively; I wasn't in any way aware of the European cinema I would be studying, that world of Godard and Wenders and Truffaut. I owe anything I know about writing to my experience in film school, just because there people thought critically about art. It was the first time I had really even known that could happen — that people would discuss

aesthetics, deconstruct Hitchcock films and how they worked, and so on. Then when I came back here, the cultural community was so small that I ended up working in theatre and crossed back and forth between the different media. A great virtue about St. John's of course is that because of its isolation and very small size you cannot have isolated communities of artists. You cannot have the playwrights and actors in one bar down here and the painters, the printmakers, and the filmmakers in another bar up there. Just by virtue of the fact that the communities are so small, they all end up working with one another and there is this wonderful cross-fertilization. Because of the size of the community and its absolute isolation, in March, when the wind is howling, you might find yourself talking to a set decorator, a fiddle player, a jazz musician and a novelist, and that is a very good thing. In a larger city like Toronto, the literary community is its own little village. Here I know painters and printmakers and photographers, great theatrical geniuses like Andy Jones. I think in another place you would never know them. They would live in a rarified world. But here the great geniuses — at least when I was in my early twenties — were there to meet, and they encouraged everybody.

HW So it is a generically and genetically healthier situation. Less inbreeding.

ER Yes.

HW I think it would be fair to say that one thing that defines your career as a writer is versatility: you have written two novels (*Rare Birds* and *The Nine Planets*), you have written for the stage, you have written for radio and television, and you have written screenplays, including for the film adaptation of *Rare Birds* and also for the feature film *Secret Nation*. How did that versatility evolve in your career and how does it shape your life as a writer?

ER The existence of a novelist is so marginal in Canada that a lot of the other work I do — say film and television work — is to enable me to live and take on these novels and plays and so on. I really enjoy writing the novels, but I don't think it is practical. Also, all those different forms inform one another. The foundation of all our literature, I think, is in fact the play; Shakespeare is the starting point for everything all modern writing is. The foundation of the novel is the dialogue one finds in a play. Radio is extremely close to the function of a novel because you are

inviting the audience to take on the kind of imaginary act that they do in a novel as well. A film screenplay is the medium that asks the least of the audience; it is the most passive, and that is probably what is most wrong about the movies, that they don't ask the audience to engage and to join the author in the creative act.

Also, it has to do with this town, in that I think the narrative arts in St. John's spring entirely from the theatre — the theatre that came out of the Resource Centre for the Arts in the 1970s, Codco, that whole environment. If you were to ask our authors, I think that almost all of them would say that. That is where the action was and that is what lured young people into the arts, broadly. Then at some point it changed — I don't know when — because now people talk about all these new fiction writers here: Michael Crummey and Lisa Moore and me and Ken Harvey and Michael Winter and so on. The predecessors are Andy Jones and Mary Walsh and all these people in theatre, but it seems as if there was some sort of generational transition. The theatre here is still very vital — don't get me wrong — as vital as it always was, but something else came out of that. Nonetheless, I think that the literary imagination of contemporary Newfoundland writers is almost universally informed by the collective theatre — not just playwriting either, something much different than that: the collective theatre experience, which is an unusual thing.

HW I have really noticed in recent writing in Atlantic Canada, and particularly in writing in Newfoundland, a real preoccupation with the impact of tourism on the region. If you look at your first novel, *Rare Birds*, for instance, the foundation of it is Newfoundlanders' need to attract visitors in order to generate income. The two main characters of the novel, restaurant owner Dave Purcell and his inventive neighbour Alphonse Murphy, stage the sighting of a rare bird — the *Tasker's Sulphureous* — near Dave's failing restaurant just outside of St. John's, to save it from going into receivership. Running through the novel is a strong vein of satire, not just of tourists but also of the necessity to play host to them. How do you feel about tourism as an economic mainstay in the province?

ER I think tourism is a kind of pollution. It is a terrible thing, and as something that one has to rely upon for economic survival it is the last act of desperation. It is not a real economy in a way, and I think

that is what is going in *Rare Birds*. The novel is about more than tourism; the point is that we are acting in some sort of larger tourism play. Newfoundland's authentic nature is gone, and for Newfoundland to survive, all we can do is to pretend to be the kind of people we were. Another thing about tourism is that it is the service industry that keeps it going, so you basically reduce the labour force to servants to the visitors. As I say, I think tourism is pollution, but the funny thing about it is that we have all been tourists. Of course we like to think of ourselves as travellers, but we are tourists. For instance, I just took a trip to Avignon in the south of France and walked around gawking at things. You almost feel that you don't want to be doing this, you don't want to be a removed observer; you want to be part of this world, but there is no way for you to do that in the short time you afford yourself in those places. I cannot imagine what small proportion of tourists want to be tourists. They all want to be travellers. So, it's very funny. And we want travellers to come visit us here because we all love meeting people, of course. You meet someone and they come to your house and you make new friends and worlds meet. It's fabulous, but tourism isn't like that.

HW One thing *Rare Birds* suggests is that tourism promotes a highly conflicted attitude towards what might be called heritage culture. In a diatribe against tourism in the novel, Dave reflects that "It was the last hope for Newfoundland, to become some kind of vast park, its people zoo pieces, playing either famished yokels or bit parts in a costume drama, a nation of amateur actors dressed up like murderous Elizabethan explorers, thrilling to the touch of their tights and tunics as they danced for spare change."

ER Now, that's terribly cruel, isn't it? *[laughs]*

HW Admittedly, this is one of a number of cocaine-induced flights of fancy on Dave's part, but at the same time this sense of tourism as a kind of prostitution and pantomime runs into his somewhat more sober (if not exactly level-headed) moments in the novel. What do you see as the cultural impact of tourism?

ER The impact of tourism on Newfoundland culture is terrible. I think that it makes us backward-looking. Newfoundland's survival is doubtful at this point. The demographics are against us: we are depopulating, we are shrinking, our birth rate is very low, our population is aging. If you keep extending things, we are going to cease to exist.

Really, we are. So we say that we can use tourism to help the economy, help us survive, but that stops us from looking forward. This may be changing just recently, but for the last while Newfoundlanders were completely preoccupied with their past: Confederation, past political injustices, everything. It was just a constant nagging weight that Newfoundlanders all carried with them, more so I think than any other Canadians (if we can call ourselves Canadians). But this is all looking backward. The tourism is looking backward, the sense of being hard done by politically is looking backward, and you very rarely saw someone looking forward. In the material culture here there was a recent boom in renovation. Everything got built up, but when people built new buildings like The Rooms, they cited the vernacular and so on. No-one said “Okay, here’s a brand new school of Newfoundland architecture.” Futurism was a completely foreign thought here. Tourism is retarding because there is no tourism of the future. There is only tourism of relics, of the past; that is what tourism really is. When I was in Avignon, I went to see the papal palace. One doesn’t go to see innovation in Avignon, and no one comes to Newfoundland to see what the future may hold for the place. So you are custodians of the past and you are sort of bound to it if you are clinging to tourism or if you are servicing tourism. So I think the cultural impact is retarding.

HW A highly comic but also interesting element in *Rare Birds* is the dynamics between the hapless but somewhat worldly Dave and “the lunatic bayman” Phonse, whom Dave condescendingly suspects to be backward and barbaric but, at the same time, who constantly surprises Dave not just because of his ingenuity and capability (the guy builds a viable submarine, for instance) but also because of his intelligence and sophistication. That relationship seems to gesture to an important urban-rural tension in the province, which those outside the province probably have little appreciation of, instead seeing Newfoundlanders as Newfoundlanders, period. How do you see that relationship between urban and rural Newfoundland?

ER People outside of Newfoundland will be unfamiliar with the divide here, and it’s marked. People used to say “beyond the overpass” to evoke it. Back when I was a boy, there was one overpass in Newfoundland, just on the western extreme of St. John’s. So there were two Newfoundlands — there was St. John’s and beyond the overpass

— which was a joke, of course, because the economy of Newfoundland, essentially, is located in the bays of the northeast coast. That is what generated the wealth of Newfoundland. St. John's was a colonial capital, and there was some wealth generation here, but really we owed it all to rural Newfoundland and the fishery, the seal hunt, the timber, and so on. St. John's was long regarded as just the headquarters of colonial administrators and merchant families and so on (I think that is a tension everywhere), but St. John's denizens fancied themselves very cosmopolitan, perhaps because there was an international harbour. In a way, I think they were, but one way to prop up that self-image was to define the people from around the bay as an "other" and make them their yokels. Now, of course, that is nonsense, because rural Newfoundland is what defines the place. They are the innovators, they are the people really responsible, up until recently I suppose, for the imagination and the culture of Newfoundland. Up to a certain point in our history, not much of it originated from St. John's, though lately it might be the case. Because of these demographic trends I mentioned earlier, I think that rural Newfoundland really may be on death's door right now. The rural society that defined Newfoundland, that people imagine Newfoundland to be, may soon cease to exist, so that tension will cease to exist.

Newfoundlanders, though, love the character of Phonse in the book because he is not a caricature. While he is very broad, what is noticeable (and in his portrayal of Phonse in the movie *Andy Jones* really got this) is that he is ingenious, he is an improviser, he is a man who knows how to survive in a very harsh environment by his wits, by crafty decisions, by ingenuity.

HW And, of course, by always having a Plan B.

ER And always having a Plan B. I guess if you are going to be an improviser you are going to want to have choices. And Dave mistakes him for being a serf rather than a man who has some ownership of his identity and his land and what he does.

HW The main characters in both novels often seem to serve as vehicles for broader reflections on the state of Newfoundland. In a passage in *Rare Birds*, for example, Dave contemplates Newfoundland's decision to join Canada and characterizes it as a kind of political suicide: "It was only now becoming obvious that the final political decision was a mistake of appalling dimensions. Newfoundland had, in 1948, voted

itself out of existence. The battered and bewildered nation, the sport of historic misfortune, the Cinderella of the British Empire, had ended its suffering by taking its own life.” To what degree are you editorializing there? Is Dave, in part anyway, expressing your take on that decision?

ER Ahhhhh, not just mine [*laughing*]. I think it may be a very widely held view in Newfoundland, wider than most outside Newfoundland really understand. As I said, I think we are now getting a whiff of the end. There has been some decline since Confederation. People say we were in a terrible state before we joined Canada, but of course we were in the black. There were a lot of very good things to say about the society then as well. There had been an interregnum where the state had sort of failed here, but all the states in Europe failed at the same time. We’re talking all of middle Europe: Germany, France, and so on.

HW This was during the Great Depression.

ER Yes, so to say that Newfoundland was singular at that time is crazy. But the political reality now is that we have seven seats in Parliament. We really have no influence over our affairs. We are a de facto colony of Canada, and I don’t think it is good for the long-term future of what was once a very vital, interesting and distinct place. We always find it incredible to hear Quebec talking about wanting to be a distinct society and so on. How do you think that played here? People went “Distinct society? Jesus, we were a distinct nation, besides being a distinct society.”

I think almost any author is going to show up in the pronouncements of his protagonist. I am trying to think of who is that good that they don’t take that opportunity to editorialize. If you have the passion to write the book, there is going to be something motivating the author that is going to come out as a bit of a polemic.

HW A muted but important part of the context in *Rare Birds* is the collapse of the fishery, which is brought up on a number of occasions in the novel. Dave, for one thing, used to work at the Fisheries (of course, a department of the federal government), and certainly part of his existential baggage in the novel (and he is carrying quite a weight) is having played a part in “overseeing the dismantling of a way of life that had defined Newfoundland for four centuries.” But there are also other places where that background crops up in the novel. Dave mentions that the locals at Push Through, where the restaurant is located, have been

up to questionable activities, shall we say, since the closure of the fishery, and Dave's romantic interest, Alice, finds it too depressing to visit the rural community she came from since the fishery closed down. So it is there as a presence in various ways. What do you see as the reverberations of that development for contemporary Newfoundland?

ER The fishery is the meaning of Newfoundland. Cod was deemed our currency. The anniversary of the closure of the fishery was just a couple of days ago, and you would hear on the radio, "This is the fifteenth anniversary of the moratorium." So it is a defining line for everybody here. I don't know how big, really, the fishery was as part of the national economy, and the fishery is as big a part of the economy now as it always was, but the northern cod stock that collapsed was *the* central defining characteristic of who we were. We moved here to be as proximate to it as possible. It was everything: think of all the totems of the culture, such as dried, split cod; clothing such as Cape Annes; boats; the whole culture of the sea. There is a line in a song about the loggers called "The Badger Drive" that goes "There's one class of men in this country that's seldom mentioned in song," because, of course, all the songs, all the different cultural forms, are about the sea. So to end it was to totally finish a chapter in Newfoundland's history. Those cod stocks were mostly depleted by damage to the grounds by draggers, offshore trawlers, but it was the inshore fishery that defined us culturally, people going out in small boats, catching fish, drying them, salting them. That central image in the mythology was gone. Now I guess other cultures have mythologies or symbols or things they identify with that are not really there any more, be it rice farming in Japan or something else, so maybe we will go through that transition too. But we are at the point where the living source of all the symbolism for the nation has been terminated, and it has to have some sort of shocking impact on the people. Now maybe it will continue to exist exclusively as a mythology informing the culture and the nation, but the impact could not be more traumatic or more total.

HW In a key passage in *Rare Birds*, Dave (who is admittedly not given to unbridled optimism) mournfully contemplates the abandoned community wharfs, softball diamonds, and roads leading nowhere, relics of past efforts to develop Newfoundland, and he delivers a somewhat apocalyptic vision of the island's future:

nature was reclaiming Newfoundland in the name of the Beothuks and the great auk. The wharfs would wash away, the softball diamonds would become bogs and the phone booth would sink into the damp earth. Newfoundland had resisted civilization. The ancient Dorset peoples had failed. The Point Revenge Indians had failed. The Norse had failed. The Basques had failed. And now the British Empire and its Canadian water boys were failing. The island belonged to the black bears and caribou and lynx and crows. And they would soon have it back.

I have a sense of what your answer is going to be already, but how much are you being facetious there, and how much is this a serious contemplation of the future?

ER Can I answer “both”? I mean, we live in an extremely harsh environment. Early Newfoundland nationalists talked about developing the interior, believed that we would have this great agricultural future and so on, and it never came to anything, because of the harshness of the climate. The whole Newfoundland project is hubristic, in a way. So I am being serious in that we might have lost the battle here at the frontier, at the edge of human habitation, but at the same time I think there is a very real prospect of us innovating and changing. The national identity is so profound that I don’t realistically see us falling back into the sea and the roads falling apart and the black bears inhabiting the land again. It was a hyperbolic observation [*laughs*]. However, if we don’t change, that is our future. We can hand the keys to the crows.

HW [*Laughs*] *Rare Birds* was made into a feature film directed by Sturla Gunnarsson, for which you wrote the screenplay. What did you find notable about the process of adapting your own novel, as opposed to writing a screenplay from scratch, which you did with *Secret Nation*?

ER I have also written many television scripts and so on, so I have done a lot of that work. The situation with the adaptation was that I had written the book, and indeed I had written it several times, so I was more inclined to make the movie a new thing, and once I got some momentum I started taking it in different directions.

HW My impression is that writers usually want to keep track of that process of adaptation because they want the film to be true to the book, but you are suggesting that you wanted to do something different.

ER I have to give credit to the producer of the film, Paul Pope, because some of the other producers, who were from away, were worried about that hazard, getting the novelist to write the screenplay. They said "He's going to be immovable; he's going to be clinging to his stuff," and Paul said, "Well, he's written screenplays before he's ever written a novel, so I think we can reason with him. I think he understands the process." My inclination was to change it more radically, and I remember that when we were working on it I came into a meeting with a draft and Sturla had a copy of the draft there and a copy of *Rare Birds*, which he had gone through with a highlighter singling out scenes and funny bits that he really wanted in the movie, and he was the one who brought it back to the novel. I am totally at a loss to tell you what the really pronounced changes were that I had imagined, but Sturla was really determined to keep it as close to the book as possible. The book was faulted by one critic for being too obviously cinematic, bait for a movie deal. I am quite happy the movie went ahead. The only change that the producers wanted was that they wanted it implied at the end of the movie that the boy gets the girl. Dave and Alice are not together at the end of the book, but in the movie there is a suggestion they will be. Also, the character of Dave's friend Larry was in the screenplay, and his part was shot and came off very well, but the movie was far too long, and the editor noticed that the excision of that character from the film version would bring them exactly to the commercially desirable length of the film.

HW And it wouldn't leave hideous scars.

ER No. It was so irresistible that there was very little I could do to argue against it, even though I liked the actor who performed the role and thought he and William Hurt, who played Dave, were very good together.

HW Plus Larry in the book is a wonderfully smarmy character.

ER Yes, I loved Larry in the book.

They wanted a more literal adaptation of the book, which is a strange thing; I mean, it's not the story people most often hear. Still, I have never had any sympathy for the oft-heard complaint by authors that they cocked up his or her work in the screen adaptation. Maybe it is because I have worked in both media, but to me they are different animals, so any of the flaws that are in the *Rare Birds* film I take no ownership of

and I blame on other people entirely, and all the good things I can just take credit for [*laughing*]. I think that is just my privilege as the author, right? And people paid for the right to adapt it, so that is good too. I am mystified that anybody gets a cheque and then complains that the original is better than the adaptation, which is invariably the case.

HW You had worked in both fiction and film before, but did that process of working on the same text in two media give you any new insights into the particularities of each medium?

ER Yes. I think the one thing you notice is dialogue. Sometimes, at the behest of the producers, I would take stretches of dialogue from the book, and you discover that some things that really read off the page don't read on the stage. When I work in drama of any sort, be it a screenplay or a script for the stage, or if I am working with other authors or writers on theirs (I sometimes work as a story editor on other films), I am always insisting to the producers that one of the most valuable things we can do at the eleventh hour is a table read, because you just don't know how dialogue will work until you hear it in these media, particularly with comic dialogue. We did this with *Rare Birds* too. Sometimes you say, "This one's going to be a killer, they're going to love it," and you hear it go by and it doesn't work and you run it again and it doesn't work and you ask, "Why doesn't it work? It works on the page." Yet other things that might be very slight on the page, when they are given the broad reading of a dramatic performance, they suddenly come to life. I don't know that I will ever work enough in my life on the two media to know how it works, but you certainly learn interesting things. Also, I think they both inform one another, so it is healthy for an author to work on the dramatic script as well as in the novel.

HW *The Nine Planets*, like *Rare Birds*, is a novel about the progressive meltdown of a middle-aged man, in this case Marty Devereaux, the co-principal of a tony private school in St. John's, The Red Pines. One of the notable differences between *Rare Birds* and *The Nine Planets*, though, is that the narrative of *The Nine Planets* alternates between Marty and a second protagonist, Marty's disaffected teenage niece Cathy. Did that dual focus give the writing process a different feel?

ER It is strange because I think it is a very cinematic device: we're cutting away. But then when I talk to some people — like my agent — they say, "Well, you have a script with two principal protagonists,

who are twinned. It doesn't really work." If you think about it, in conventional movies, you usually have a single protagonist. Part of the idea behind the book was the movement of planetary objects. "Planet" just means "traveller," and these people are intersecting one another. It is the whole notion of the world as wheels within wheels, and those two characters are just two of those wheels. I think it is a view of the universe and of our state of being and the way we live.

HW What was the genesis of the idea of the nine planets as a framing device in the novel?

ER A whole bunch of things happened at once. At the time I was reading about the Elizabethan world and how it related to St. John's, and my brother said, "Well the Riches, you know, were all part of Elizabeth's court. Her favorite physician was John Riche." Then I read, coincident to that, that two of Shakespeare's plays are based on novels by a guy named Barnaby Riche, who was also part of the Elizabethan world. And then I happened to read something about the astronomer Johannes Kepler, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare's. Kepler started working with Tycho Brahe, the famous Danish astronomer, who was chief astronomer for Rudolf, the Holy Roman Emperor, at the Emperor's court in Prague. Kepler had come from Graz in Austria, and because of some religious turmoil, Tycho Brahe suggested that Kepler get his belongings and some of his family members out of Graz and bring them to Prague. Brahe sent with Kepler a trusted diplomat (and I guess thug) by the name of Rosencrantz, the same Rosencrantz who has a cameo in *Hamlet*. Then I kept reading things about Kepler's notions of planetary motions. How someone comes up with an idea, I don't know, but these things all happened to me coincidentally at once: the stuff about the Shakespearean world, Newfoundland being an Elizabethan colony, our six degrees of separation connection with Johannes Kepler. That was where the book came from.

Also, I loved the idea of each chapter being based on a planet. That division, in practical terms, made it easy to write. The architecture of the book became more visible to me once I divided it into the nine chapters. I also decided to base each of the chapters on some of the mythology and science of each planet. So, obviously death is Pluto, the underworld and so on, Mars is the god of commerce, things like that. All those things figure in each chapter.

HW Another difference between *Rare Birds* and *The Nine Planets* is that the protagonist of *The Nine Planets*, Marty, is more abrasive and much less affable than Dave Purcell in *Rare Birds*. They seem to share a jaded and often caustic view of the world around them, but it seems to be harder to root for Marty because he comes across as more arrogant, more inconsiderate and self-serving, with a bit of anal-retentiveness thrown in too. Did it pose a challenge to write about such an unsympathetic protagonist as Marty?

ER Yes it did, and I think it poses a big challenge to the readers too. My notion is that in the final pages of this novel my character is going to go through the most profound change. The world is opening up to him, and he is becoming self-aware in a very positive way. You see him begin to commit selfless acts, and his selfishness and self-absorption are disappearing, and that is opening up the world for him. But that happens at the very end of the book, so it presents a challenge. People liked the book, and it got a good critical response, but I have heard the complaint that a lot of readers don't want to be with a guy like Marty for long. To say that the protagonist of a novel should always be a good person is a simple, hopeless notion. It doesn't help the novel; it doesn't help us learn anything. I think *The Nine Planets* is a damning indictment of the middle class, too: their ways, their views of their children, and so on. I am sorry that it is unpleasant, but that is the world I inhabit, and the novel is critical of it.

I really don't like Marty. I mindfully made Marty not just someone whom I would dislike, but who would profoundly dislike me. If we met at a cocktail party, and perhaps we each had one or two glasses of wine too many, we would just hate one another. Words would be exchanged. This really helped me with the character. It actually became a governing principle for me at one point, partly in reaction to people saying things about *Rare Birds* like, "Oh, the protagonist is you. You're Dave Purcell." Well I'm not. With Marty, I could think of that character just loathing me and what I stood for. The other interesting thing about that process was that Marty has these views about public education and about (for want of a better word) socialism or whatever. He is a market capitalist. Public education to him has failed entirely. So he is critical of views that I hold dear. But after a while, my protagonist, whom I hated, who would hate me, started making some sense to me, because I was working him hard. So it was a very funny process: you are living with this

guy you would not like very much. I think that the book has not been as commercially successful as *Rare Birds* for that very reason. People might read a review and think, "Oh, we have this really nasty protagonist. Well, I don't want to spend all this time with a creep." Sure, in most books you find the good in the protagonist and you identify with that and they carry you along, but you can also have a protagonist who is quite awful, and you know you are going to see tiny bits of yourself there, if not more, and then you have a critical process. To me, Marty is a much more complex character, and I think the book is better.

HW He is also afforded his little epiphanies, for instance when he goes to the pristine Perroquet Downs just outside St. John's and finds, much to his surprise, that it is lovely, and he at least momentarily feels sad that it is going to be developed, even though he has been conscripted by the developer to aid his cause.

ER And I think we can believe him more because of that. Because he is a cynic, when he has those epiphanies, they are better earned. I mean, he realizes by the end of the book that he is wrong about most things, which we would all do well to do sometimes.

HW The novel is explicitly set in what is described as post-recovery St. John's. The background is a boom in the urban economy in the wake of the moratorium on the cod fishery. How does that impart a different feel to the story? How is the context of *The Nine Planets* different from that of *Rare Birds*?

ER There was a big change from a kind of absolute despair to this crazy boomtown optimism that came with offshore oil. And we are still in it. Especially since things had been so bad for so long, I think that when we got a taste of prosperity here there was a boom in development, things got spruced up. The class and number of cars on the street noticeably changed, overnight. Some of the more expensive restaurants were full. There is a kind of madness that comes with that, too. In the book, Marty is on the outside of that prosperity, but all those people in boomtowns that are close to it get hypnotized by it, right? And market capitalism is a great hypnotizing force. In the myths of market capitalism — and people still buy this, I find it crazy — there is this sort of Oprah optimism which says "You just pull yourself together, you comb your hair, darling, and make sure you look fine. You get out there, and you're going to take on this world and beat it. You can do whatever you

want to do.” Which is of course in some cases not at all true. Not to say that people should just give up, but there are factors other than their own initiative in play. The myths of capitalism are total myths. Most capitalists are successful because they have capital [*laughs*], not because of their initiative or anything.

HW One feature of *The Nine Planets* is the palpable presence, to my mind anyway, of the larger context of globalization, particularly through the entrepreneurial shakers-and-movers whom Marty — an entrepreneurial minnow — hopes will help him finance a global chain of private schools. A central part of the plot is Marty’s ill-advised foray into the world of global franchise capitalism, and the novel is filled with the euphemistic argot of economic globalization — words like “branding,” “market opportunities,” “repurposing,” and so on. It is, in other words, a very contemporary and international milieu being evoked in the novel, in a way that draws attention to the impact on people’s lives of larger political and economic forces. Was this just a matter of going with the times, or was this a more conscious emphasis that you really wanted to inject into the novel?

ER Again, it is both of those things. It’s the zeitgeist, and it was conscious. When better minds than mine promised globalization, it was like the promise of the internet. Maybe it’s my generation, but I thought it was one of the kinds of things that was on “Here Comes the Seventies” when I was a kid. It never really was going to happen. Globalization was just a threat. And then suddenly overnight we were in a global economy. Everybody could feel it. The world had shrunk immediately. Suddenly all my friends were living all over the planet. You could trade things from a computer. I ceased having to fly to Toronto as much to ply my trade in the film and television business because we were connected virtually. It just happened. Maybe because of my age, I didn’t think that it would be as stark, as absolute, perhaps irreversible, as it has become. And the worries about it, the confines of one world and the loss of authenticity in places just jumped at me really quickly. Again these were things that people cautioned about. You know, “You don’t want to go to Italy and walk into the same restaurant that’s down the street from you, let alone Hong Kong or Beijing or Ulan Bator,” and that is happening so fast that it’s incredible. But we have to consider whether there was some sort of build-up. Globalization is a quantum change, but

it must have been informed by some things that were building up for years. Maybe we were bound to become one planet, one people; maybe that was all there and it has just manifested itself suddenly, at one time. I don't know. But it shocked me in how sudden and complete it was.

HW Marty's prospective partner (and ultimately his nemesis) in his private school franchise venture is local developer George Hayden, who, it turns out, is stringing Marty along in order to convince him to silence Marty's co-principal and friend, Hank Lundrigan, who is leading the opposition against Hayden's plans to develop a gated community on the Perroquet Downs. Hayden is a very interesting and ambivalent character, because on the one hand he exudes a certain entrepreneurial vitality, but on the other hand he manipulates people and wields his influence in unethical, even extortionate ways. He is quite ready to break whatever eggs it takes to make his omelette. You have described your relationship with Marty as very much an ambivalent one. How about Hayden?

ER I really dislike the character. It is important that Hayden is a capitalist by virtue of inheriting capital. He operates with a sense of entitlement. The billionaire Warren Buffett once said that most people who talk about free-market capitalism inherited all their money. So people who say that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps never really had to do it themselves. They had someone else pull them up for them. I see Hayden as that kind of guy. He is not based on any specific person, but I think I must have met these kinds of people. As for my relationship with him . . . my politics are very antique, social democratic principles, totally discredited now, but I am of the view that people like Hayden should have most of their money taxed away from them [*chuckles*] since they didn't earn it. But I guess that Hayden represents a current that is pretty pronounced in Canada right now.

HW When I suggest that your relationship with him is again perhaps an ambivalent one, I am thinking especially of the line he uses when he is complaining about the subordinate position enforced upon people by a service economy: "Build, baby, or wait tables." It seems as if there is a certain investment in that statement, almost an admiration of that determination not to get stuck in the past but to keep moving ahead. On the other hand, there are all kinds of other things going on in the novel that put Hayden in a bad light.

ER I completely believe in that statement, “Build, baby, or wait tables.” Again, just because you don’t like a character doesn’t mean you can’t believe some things he says. Hayden marvels that Marty is not yet smart enough to know the way the deal works, and he is impatient with Marty at the end of the novel. His attitude is, “This is the way business is done, buddy, and you were naïve to think that we were rooting for you. We were only with you when our interests were mutual, and after that, baby, you’re on your own.” He so much as told Marty that before, in a way, but . . .

HW . . . Marty just doesn’t understand the code.

ER Hayden is friendly as long as it is beneficial to him and then otherwise he will cut you loose, which is what he does in the end. While they have that business lunch, the degree of Hayden’s corruption is made plain to Marty, and he is a fool for not being more cautious.

HW One recurring theme in the novel is an impatience with the past. This is not just something expediently expressed by Hayden, who delivers a wonderful diatribe about how capitalism is the true heritage of Newfoundland, but it is also expressed by others. Marty has cynical views about historical fiction, and both he and Cathy are highly dismissive about Cathy’s failed playwright father Rex’s tedious dramas about Newfoundland’s history: the Beothuk, sealing disasters, Confederation, and so on. And the opening image of the novel is of history — in the form of ice sculptures of a Viking and the old tricoloured flag of Newfoundland — literally melting.

ER A bit heavy-handed, maybe [*laughs*].

HW Does all this amount to a kind of warning against being pre-occupied with the past?

ER It is a little push to say, “Those are relics. Let them go.” It is obviously a nagging complaint I have. I like to think that novelists in Newfoundland are engaged in the larger discussion about the direction of our society. We are now in a place where we have to start thinking about where we are going. For a long time in Newfoundland, there was a complete denial of the past. I think that my grandparents, for instance, only thought of the future, and they denied the past. It was disgusting, because it was poverty and penury, and so they let it go to such a radical degree that their children had to restore it, for some sense of national

pride. Now we are coming to a new transformation in that identity. The nation here is five hundred years old. Maybe that is its natural course. Perhaps it is now time for us to become a modern society.

HW Part of this tone also — as the melting tricolor suggests — seems to be an impatience with Newfoundland nationalism, which is a timely issue given that secessionist rumblings in Newfoundland seem to have only intensified since the novel was published. Cathy, for instance, metaphorically rolls her eyes at the thought of her father's drunken "nationalist act, preaching 'Free Newfoundland' nonsense — 'the ultimate expression of a people,' 'the Terms of Union were terms of surrender,' 'the example of Iceland' — to the converted." Is Cathy here just expressing the disaffection and disengagement of the young or is she articulating some reservations that you might have as well?

ER I think that I am the "terms-of-confederation, terms-of-surrender, example of Iceland" bore that she is rolling her eyes at. That is my thinking, and I am presuming that she would find it tedious. Marty was someone quite other than myself; this sixteen-year-old girl was even more so. So it is a dialogue, a philosophical dialogue you can have with your characters, right? And maybe the bores of Newfoundland nationalism from a previous generation are necessary for a newer kind of Newfoundland nationalism. The Newfoundland nationalists — the rubber-boot radicals they were deemed here in town — were dismissed not that long ago, and now suddenly it has become very middle-class.

HW And it is a note that is being sounded more and more by the business elite, too.

ER Absolutely. It is not a fringe, radical thing. It is not connected with left-wing thought, either. It is a mainstream, even mercantile kind of notion, and it is expanding virulently.

HW Is there a generation gap in the attitude towards it, that Cathy is representative of, or do you think that it is broadly shared?

ER I think that Cathy's generation do not connect at all with Canadian institutions. They connect with those global ones. Nationalism at any level is a somewhat noxious and poisonous human compulsion, but it also creates identity and community. So it is a tricky bit of business that can turn nasty and evil very quickly. I think at Cathy's age, her tribe is identified through different things, notably through music and

things she shares with her peers world-wide. She doesn't think in terms of Newfoundland nationalism. She notably doesn't think in Canadian terms either. As I say, it is a debate. Perhaps it happens in the book because I am not sure which side I come down on.

HW In both novels, you seem to be an equal-opportunity satirist, skewering quite a wide range of targets, from opportunistic developers to cynically self-serving politicians to trendy, boutique leftists. Who deserves more of the credit here, you or your characters?

ER That's the job. That is what you do if you are writing satire, and I think to gain any kind of credibility the first people you throw overboard are your own. I am very happy to hear you call me an equal-opportunity satirist. That's very kind [*laughs*]. But some of those characters got away from me in a good way. They said things that were not things that I would think and that convinced me, and hopefully the reader has the exact same experience. Readers want to get inside the minds of characters they do not necessarily identify with and have them convince them and get all shaken up, intellectually. Satire is an intellectual exercise. It makes people think and ask questions and be critical, more so than some other forms or genres. That is its thing. It's pointy [*laughs*] and sharp. Certainly in *The Nine Planets* the characters are more the engine, whereas the observations in *Rare Birds* in many ways are more mine. That is another reason why I think *The Nine Planets* is a more sophisticated book. I hope it is, anyway, since I wrote it after *Rare Birds* [*laughs*]. I would hope that my books would get more sophisticated. I am working on another book now, and again you have another character who questions the world he is working in. That's my shtick.