

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, October 1, 2013

Hosts: Jeff and Norma Glazer

Novel: *River Thieves* by Michael Crummey

Papers:

Biographical: Diane Stupay

Critical: Arthur Stupay

Members of The Novel Club met at the Glazer home in Pepper Pike on a lovely early-fall evening. After the preliminary gathering and refreshment period, President Leon Cabinet called the meeting to order at approximately 8:20. Guests were introduced; committee reports were solicited. Treasurer Mary Douthit reported that current bills have been paid and most dues have been collected. Jane Hammond was commended for the particularly nice cover on this year's program booklet. Louise Mooney read minutes from the June meeting.

Diane Stupay presented the biographical paper on this month's author.

Michael Crummey thinks of himself "first as a poet," and his first writing was poetry which he started writing in college. Born in 1965 in Buchans, Newfoundland, he was the second of four sons in his family. He began writing poetry in college, and received a Bachelor's degree in English in 1987. Commentators have described his writing as "lyrical vignettes with a punch;" he published two well-received books of poetry and a short story collection in the 1990s. One colleague noted that "storytelling is a competitive sport" in Newfoundland, and Crummey published three novels (*River Thieves*, *The Wreckage*, and *Galore*, in the first decade of this century. He is married and lives in Newfoundland now, and has been called "as Canadian as a person can get."

Crummey's work has been influenced by his father's storytelling and by Canadian narrative poets' writing about ordinary people and obsession with the past. He has described his second book of poems as a collaboration between himself and other Newfoundlanders past and present. He lived away from Newfoundland for 14 years, while writing his books of poetry and short stories as well as most of *River Thieves*, his debut novel. The novel began with his interest in the death of the last known Beothuk in St. John's; but research led Crummey to explore the "story of the Peytons, who played a central role in most of the interactions with the Beothuk in the decades leading up to their extinction," particularly with the "starkly different attitudes father and son displayed towards the Beothuk." His subsequent novels, *The Wreckage* (set in

the 20th century) and *Galore*, deal with Newfoundland people's relationship with the sea. *Galore* presently has a huge following in Canada.

Art Stupay presented the critical paper on *River Thieves*.

River Thieves is historical fiction, mixed with some biography, dealing with the Beothuk who were among migrating tribes from Labrador who coalesced sometime around the 15th century. The biographical content includes the material about Mary March, who was captured by Europeans with the idea of using her as an interpreter/mediator between Europeans and natives. Also biographical is some of the material about John Peyton Senior, who was known for stealing furs. Art's paper examined substantial historical information about the characters who appear in the novel, noting similarities and differences between the novel's presentation and the known historical information, including the facts that John Peyton Junior married shortly after the novel's events, had four sons, and lived to a ripe old age.

Important historical elements of the novel include the overt conflicts presented in the novel, but also underlying conflicts among previous migratory tribes. Issues that should be considered in analyzing the novel include relationships among peoples; sexual relationships; tensions between fathers and sons; and complexities related to justice and the rule of law.

Crummey presents the novel's events with beautiful imagery, and many of his characters call to mind types from Greek tragedy.

Art supplied seven questions for discussion; the group addressed five of the seven:

- 1. Michael Crummey claimed his "book was about regret." What regrets motivated the main characters? Lost relationship? Upbringing? What?**

On this topic, readers suggested that the cold environment might be a significant driving element in the characters' lives, though that might not account for some of their deepest regrets. Peyton Junior seemed to have many regrets related to his own weakness and passivity, though it was pointed out that he tries unsuccessfully to assert himself against his elders during the trip to the lake. Cassie seemed notably **not** caught up in regret, seeming rather to deliberately choose her own way in life.

- 2. Crummey has said that the physical environment is one of the main characters. In what way is that true? How does the setting impact the human characters in the novel?**

Here again the climate was invoked: harshness and cold sets a tone of uncertainty, with fear of loss of protection present throughout—the isolating nature, bleakness, and unforgiving harshness of nature leaves readers with a sense of place more than people. It was noted that although place is always

important in fiction, Crummey's cataloguing of images of environment creates an unusually strong, almost overwhelming character. Readers felt that features of this novel such as the seasonality and the native/colonizer interactions recalled elements of other historical pieces such as *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob DeZoet*; others noted that harsh environment, and elegiac treatment of clashes between cultures recalled *Beowulf*. Some readers argued that harsh climate brought out physical and ethical harshness in characters, while others noted that such harsh behaviors also appear in various types of climates.

3. Crummey's prose, often poetic, contrasts with the harsh personalities and environment. How does language impact the story? Any thoughts on the relationship between the action and tone in the novel?

Consideration of Crummey's prose prompted two readers to comment on the effect of the language on the reading experience—at times the poetry of the language allows the reader to step back from harshness of the action; or, from another angle, bleakness of the language makes presentation seem non-judgmental of the characters' harsh actions. Then several readers expressed interest and opinions on the likelihood of the two cultures (immigrant and Beothuk) living in contact with each other for so long without learning each others' languages—and what further insights that phenomenon might suggest about the novel as a whole.

4. What do you think about John Senior? We do not get much from his own speech. How does John Senior's perception of himself differ from the way others perceive him? Same with Cassie. Why do you think she acted "to be free and clear"? Why did she give in to Buchan and with no one else, especially John Jr., as his father may have wished?

Discussion of this question began with comments on the relationship between John Senior and John Junior, including some disagreement as to whether the relationship was a strong bond, a caring relationship, perhaps even a loving relationship—and/or whether it presented a classic, Greek-tragic misunderstanding between father and son. Perhaps some of this analysis depends on the reader's own experience, at least for male readers.

From that point, discussion digressed somewhat into debate on the strengths or weaknesses of the novel's plot construction and the weakness or success of its concluding segments.

Questions 5 and 6, dealing with "misunderstanding" as a theme and with the relationships of different characters (Cassie and Peyton, Jr.) to Mary, were left unaddressed for lack of time.

7. The governor's mansion is in a state of disrepair—in a state of "irreparable damage...." Is there also a counterpart in the relationships

between the main characters of “irreparable damage”? Could it have been rectified?

One reader noted that the since the novel is about the disrepair, to have it rectified would undercut the novel. There followed several miscellaneous remarks about functions of various characters and effectiveness (or the reverse) of complex time structure and pattern followed in resolution of novel’s ending.

The meeting was adjourned after announcement (for the members’ interest) of an upcoming “Octavofest” program. Members continued their conversations over closing visits to the refreshment table, as another meeting closed.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Fox