

BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick Warner. *One Hit Wonders*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2015. ISBN 978-1-55081-613-6

Patrick Warner, the Irish-Canadian award-winning author of *Double Talk* (2011) and four poetry collections — *Perfection* (2012), *Mole* (2009), *There, There* (2005), and *All Manner of Misunderstanding* (2001) — engages with a whirlwind of contemporary issues including dysfunctional marriages, addiction to drugs, depression, and criminality in his latest novel, *One Hit Wonders*. Freddy, a writer based in St. John's, Newfoundland, emerges as the main character of the novel. Even though Freddy has published a very successful novel, he has not been able to produce a sequel (hence the title *One Hit Wonders*). Temporally, the story opens after the death of Freddy's wife Lila, whose affair, cocaine addiction, and subsequent religious obsession we follow throughout the text.

Reflections on storytelling pervade Warner's novel, and reliability is repeatedly constructed and deconstructed throughout. At the beginning of *One Hit Wonders* we encounter Freddy, who serves as the story's first-person narrator. However, as the narrative progresses, Freddy turns into an omniscient third-person narrator able to access other characters' thoughts and experiences. Readers are left wondering whether they should trust this "double" narrative voice. In fact, while Freddy argues for his trustworthiness, at times he contradictorily refers to his writing as being "delusional." Also, Freddy reports his friend Ted's belief that for writers it is impossible to "enter the mind of another human being" (51), adding to the readers' confusion surrounding reliability.

Freddy's unusual narrative ability to penetrate the thoughts of others is reflected upon both visually and verbally. An icon of a fly precedes the first chapter and is reproduced three more times, placed at the centre of an otherwise blank page. The image of the fly supports the narration, drawing attention to the circular structure of the novel and its focus on empathy as the power of identifying with the emotions of others. In fact, even though the meaning of the icon is not explicitly declared, it can be inferred from Freddy's reflections on his role as narrator. He explains: "To do what I must do next, I have to shapeshift. If I am going to interpret what happened when I was not present, if I am going to know the thoughts of another, or conjure up scenes I didn't witness first hand, I will have to become the fly on the wall" (51). On the one hand, Freddy confesses that "the world [he has] created is a fake, a bad joke, nothing but word games" (18), therefore pointing to the unreliability of his account. On the other hand, later in the novel, he stresses the truthfulness of his account by informing readers that "everything I told you about Lila's breakdown, about Snuffy attacking Al, about how it all played out is — to the best of my knowledge — absolutely true, all except for one detail: who drove the truck" (226). His transformation into a fly, metaphorically speaking, seems to grant him some degree of reliability. His insect-like status allows him to eavesdrop on and experience first-hand the stories of Lila and the characters that surround her, which he reconstructs as a narrator.

Freddy's reconstruction involves his interpolation in the narrative of transcripts of conversations between Lila and Al, pages from Lila's journal, Snuffy's composition (Snuffy is a criminal involved in a failed scheme to steal Freddy's money), Freddy's own fictional diary entries, and a story written by Freddy's psychologist (very much based on and offering a personal interpretation of Freddy's diary and life events). The inclusion of such a variety of sources that contribute additional information to the narrative speaks to Warner's layered storytelling practice: while Freddy attempts to reconstruct the events surrounding Lila's death and their marital crisis, Lila tries to rebuild her life by

turning to religion and Freddy's psychologist attempts to provide a fictional reconstruction of his patient's trauma.

Warner's narrative style, his presentation of Freddy's "confused" storytelling, and the inclusion of several source stories draws readers into the novel, prompting them to experience the uneasiness and confusion lived by the characters that populate the book. More specifically, just as Freddy seems to switch back and forth between reality and a fictional world, readers too are left wondering where they stand and what or whom they believe in. Ultimately, it does not seem to really matter if Freddy's is an honest account of what happened to his wife. His reconstruction could very well be his second novel. Instead, what really matters is Warner's ability to affect his readers, transpose them into the pages of *One Hit Wonders*, and make them dissect his characters in a way that reflects what Freddy and his psychologist do with the other characters in the book.

The setting of the novel is undoubtedly recognizable as contemporary St. John's. Not only does Warner include numerous references to the city's buildings, roads, and neighbourhoods, but he also provides vivid and powerful descriptions of how characters experience the city. For instance, Freddy remembers St. John's from a trip abroad: "Clear images of St. John's on a snowy winter day: looking down from Harvey Road on the black tar wood smoke. I look at the harbour, follow the line of snow-covered hills to the grey Atlantic. I stop, lean over with my hands on my knees and take a deep breath, almost expecting my lungs to fill with icy air." Freddy's "sensory memory" (266) is an example of Warner's "sensory writing," which is able to portray vividly the feelings of the people who navigate the city. In *One Hit Wonders*, sensory writing results in a finely drawn portrayal of the change in St. John's and its population following the "wave of oil" that Warner's characters acknowledge and discuss.

Warner's insistence on weather makes his description of St. John's all the more lively and tangible. To begin with, his poetic descriptions highlight the link between two of the defining features of St. John's, snow and sea: "a tail of powdery snow unwinds from the roof next door,

pirouettes: the tiny snowflakes, made overnight in the freezer of minus twenty, shiver all silvery in mid-air, like a shoal of sardines turning against a two-dimensional screen of ocean" (27–28). In this novel, weather impacts not only places around the city, but also its people. Lila's reflections on Newfoundland men and the environmental and social influence of the city on their personalities ultimately become an analysis of the temperament and feelings of Newfoundlanders at large and the impact of weather on their emotions. In fact, Warner's writing and characters do seem to suggest that the harsh, long winters of St. John's shape the people of the city and affect their lives and attitudes. Finally, the colourful depictions of characters like Snuffy and Gosse; the inclusion of features specific to Newfoundland English in their speech, such as the generalization of the third-person singular inflection to a present-tense marker; and the usage of local expressions and vocabulary all contribute to Warner's rendering of the setting of the novel.

Readers familiar with the city of St. John's and its inhabitants will find the novel more accessible than those who are unfamiliar with this corner of the world. But Warner's writing does not exclude other readerships. *One Hit Wonders* is a novel about contemporary issues in contemporary St. John's, written for contemporary readers of the city and beyond. It is a story that keeps you guessing, analyzing, investigating, and turning page after page looking for answers and clarifications. The ending of the novel and Freddy's return to St. John's after a trip abroad to the same location he had visited during his last vacation with Lila seem to suggest that going back home is a chance to go back to his life, and perhaps his writing. Much is left unclear at the end of the novel, but perhaps this is why readers are fully captivated by *One Hit Wonders* and willingly engaged in the reconstruction of what, exactly, happened to Freddy's wife, Lila.

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