

Cracking Devlin's code; basking in Bowness



GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

✉ gclarke@herald.ca

George Elliott Clarke is a professor of literature at the University of Toronto.

A couple of times over the past decade or so, John Devlin has sent me his strange verses for me to puzzle through — and enjoy, and the last occasion was in 2012.

A Dartmouthian with strong appreciation for the Minas Basin mudflats and the locality's peculiar painterly light, Devlin's last package included two slim booklets, both "long poems": *Enigma of the Piano* and *The Ghost on the Mezzanine*, both published by Gegenschein Books, and both featuring Devlin's architectural drawings, which are actually more like cranky but illuminated

doodles.

Finally, I've cracked them, and I am compelled to report their compelling oddity.

The booklets are curiosities, and Devlin's narrative poetry joins autobiographical rumination, obsession over a more-or-less dissatisfying time abroad at Cambridge (University), half medievalist Holy Grail-seeking and half Greco-Roman mythology reconstituted, and the stunningly brilliant poetic line, image, or phrase, which appears gleaming amid the inscrutable crucible of his unorthodox alchemy.

In a word, Devlin's poetry is "mystical." No, it's not in the same league as that of William Blake (see *America: A Prophecy*), or Kit Smart (see *Jubilate Agno*), or Gerard de Nerval (see *Aurelia*).

However, it is arresting in terms of its visions of Nova Scotia (Devlin names it "old Latin Scotland") as a mash-up of Cavalier romance, Gothic goings-on, Roman nymphs and Greek gods, as a collision, really, between the "High Art" of Europe and the

earthy, salty realities of Maritime life.

Thus, inexplicable, lines about a night of "lunacy full swollen with the influenza and other forms of astrological fever" give way to the plain, potent observation that "the bay is swollen and heavy with fall mackerel."

Similarly, a vague complaint about England segues into the homely recognition, "I am too poor to go south: so I shovel the drive again and again, bring the food in on the dog-sled, split wood, carry water."

Then: "The snow is too deep even to walk out and get the mail from England."

Despite my quotation of nice, solid lines, there is no denying that Devlin delves in weird narratives that resemble Monty Python or Dr. Who scenarios, or read like *Alice in Wonderland by the Sea*. It's as if Thomas Raddall and J.R.R. Tolkien had traded cradles at birth.

Yet, superb beauty occurs. Check this description: "The flowers fall and fall and linden

pollen collects upon / the surface of the oily harbour down where the old docks are rotting . . ."

Some of the mystical lines are also striking: "Paper money worthless: except for the experience of God which is / the sensation of the Ratio imprinted in your anatomy." I'm not 100 per cent sure of Devlin's meaning, but his speaker seems to count God — and Reason — as superior to the vulgar satisfactions that money enables.

Also valuable is Devlin's uncommon hint, in these unique booklets, that Canada is better than Europe: "Go for a walk upon / the barren beaches of Minas. Cool down your brain in the wintry blasts. Do not lose grip of the superiority of Canada." (Ian Fleming's heroine in *The Spy Who Loved Me* voices a similar opinion.)

If you are interested in viewing Nova Scotia and its citizens through the very misty veil of mysticism, there's no better place to start than by reading Devlin.

Suzanne (Sue) Bowness seems

to be every bit a realist, though she allows traces of sentimentality.

Her first book, *The Days You've Spent* (Tightrope, \$15), was published in 2010, but only now is it my reading. Yet, the wait has not been harmful to the book, for its pleasures remain. She is a bard of whimsical domesticity, very much in the style of Molly Peacock, whose endorsement graces the back cover.

So, we learn that "Socks are really quite under-celebrated" and that rotting tomatoes sprout "a clean white mould / delicate like whipped cream / and hard to deem a colour of / decay."

Neat ideas, nice lines, percolate up, here and there. But there are showstoppers like *Sight Lines* and *April*: "April wallows in her own / breathtaking abilities . . . // Her exit is appropriately dramatic too / as she lets each small flower tumble away / into delicate pink clouds."

Happy National Poetry Month! May April return soon! To distill snow into blossoms.