

Riel Nason, *The Town That Drowned*, Goose Lane Editions, 2011

Michelle Butler Hallett, *Deluded Your Sailors*, Killick Press, 2011

Nothing provides fodder for teen ridicule like hysterical doomsaying. Ruby Carson, the 14-year-old heroine of Riel Nason's debut novel, is a typical, mild-mannered outcast until she plummets through the ice of the Saint John River and emerges with a prophetic vision: her hometown of Haventon, New Brunswick, swallowed by floodwaters. The revelation, which Ruby shares with disbelieving onlookers, further alienates Ruby from her peers. Add to the mix Ruby's little brother, Percy, a notoriously odd boy obsessed with launching messages in bottles, and it is clear Ruby is 'quarantined all alone on the Island of the Odd.' But perceptions change after plans to construct a hydroelectric dam reveal that Haventon will in fact be flooded as foretold. People, houses, churches—the rising river will engulf everything. Townsfolk have little choice but to bid farewell to the past and attempt to reinvent the concept of home. Inspired by actual events, *The Town That Drowned* is a coming-of-age story that pairs the literal dislocation of a young woman's life with a community's painful strides toward modernity.

The Town That Drowned takes place on the cusp of the Canadian Centennial in the mid-1960s. The world is quaint, sepia-toned. Nason does not hesitate to ramp up the whimsy, but her quirky leading characters remain on the tolerable side of preciousness. Take, for instance, Percy's manic abhorrence of even the slightest deviation of routine. Outside of the story's context, his personality might quickly become grating, gimmicky even, but Nason artfully manages to tie individuals' idiosyncrasies to larger-scale conflict. Both Percy's stubborn refusal to accept change and Ruby's tender stewardship of her weirdo brother feed into their personal stories as well as into the grand struggle for so-called civic progress. In the end the reader comes to appreciate Percy's zeal for preservation, and Ruby's testament to the fate of her small town stands as an emotional inventory of the costs of technological development in the 20th century: '[F]or every inch the water wets,' Ruby muses, 'every blade of grass, every tree stump, driveway, foundation, rock, lawn, garden, it drowns a memory.'

Nason, a seasoned columnist for the *Saint John Telegraph Journal*, writes with precision. Her sentences are tranquil and nuanced. Early on, it is easy to imagine the novel spiralling off in chaotic directions, but Nason wisely chooses to ground the story in the plight of the townsfolk forced to uproot their lives. After Ruby's prediction is proven accurate, the attention shifts from her unearthly moment of

clairvoyance to tangible concerns of her town's relocation. At first it is disappointing to see Ruby's precognitive powers fade from view; however, spectacular elements mean little unless they are affecting real people, and Nason is primarily interested in real people. Besides, not every fantastical element need be supernatural. Plenty of funny, strangely beautiful things in *The Town That Drowned* are born of frustration, loss, and remembrance of what was once familiar. Ultimately, when the magical and the everyday converge naturally, the prose shimmers, as in the case of Wesley Ball, who decides to burn his old house rather than haul it elsewhere. Soon a joyous bonfire party is underway in his front yard: 'I can certainly understand everyone feeling angry and sad—having this ultimate rude interruption come out of nowhere,' says Ruby at one point. 'I'm well aware of what it's like to realize you're way, way off in your speculation about how your life was going to be. But at least with this, everyone is in it together.'

The Town That Drowned is a gentle page-turner that explores the inevitability of growing up, as well as the fortitude of decent, unsuspecting people burdened with freak hardships beyond their control. At times moving and wistful, Nason's debut is a worthy introduction to a new CanLit talent.

Newfoundland author Michelle Butler Hallett's novel *Deluded Your Sailors* is a convoluted, genre-hopping behemoth that tracks back three centuries via damaged characters' oral storytelling, court documents, and other loose ephemera. Structurally the novel is akin to the work of English writer David Mitchell, with its cavalcade of rowdy personalities plunging deep into a rabbit hole of disparate, yet somehow interconnected, storylines. At times the intricacy is glorious, lending rich detail to the other strands of plot, but occasionally the adventure becomes muddled. The central saga, which more or less frames the book, involves novelist Nichole Wright, who is hired to pen a play celebrating Newfoundland's 250 years of European settlement. Wright is a certifiable mess. Suffering from post-traumatic stress related to past sexual abuse, she delves into the project to stabilize her mind. However, she is soon distracted by the mysterious incongruities discovered in the records kept by the Historical Accuracy Reproduction Committee. And away we go into a web of interrelated stories that animate vicious sailors, terrible shipwrecks, and foolish bureaucracy.

Hallett has a lot on her plate. Creativity abounds in *Deluded Your Sailors*, not to mention humour, but often the enormous scope of the book forces the pace to rev up into a dizzying whirlwind. Names and locales are tough to keep straight, and some readers may get seasick.

Along with Wright, the cast of characters includes the demonic Elisa Winslow, who is hell-bent on disrupting Wright's investigation into the settlement's history, and Seth Seabright, an actor caught in a sloppy state of arrested development. These surrounding figures help bring a conspiratorial and ominous mood to Wright's work, yet their storylines frequently splinter off and become hard to follow in the context of the whole. The experience is similar to that of a character who describes the confusion of a boat wreck: 'I got numb and drifted, trying to swim to the companionway. Somewhere I lost all bearing and spun underwater. I hung off a rock for a while. I...made a deal with God.' Yet Hallett deserves credit for her immense vision. The novel's form may be challenging because its underlying questions are formidable: How much of who we are is defined by our collective past? What if that past is a lie, a forgery? What solace can be found in sailing the shifting seas of memory?

Readers who wade through the rocky seas at the outset will be rewarded with some genuinely exhilarating scenes. Residing in the middle of the book is the engrossing story of a crafty young girl who eventually scales her way to the position of sea captain. In extended passages, Hallett's gift for creating dynamic characters is apparent, as is her penchant for lively, distinct language. Even if readers may temporarily lose their way, the novel's elaborate design can be appreciated for its close mirroring of the nebulous nature of historical memory. '[Y]ou wrecked my hold on history with your ledger and letters and proof,' Wright cries near the end of the book. Having gone through a disorienting trip themselves, readers will be ready to commiserate with such a plaintive epiphany. But *Deluded Your Sailors*' imaginative breadth and stylistic inventiveness more than compensate for the occasionally rough ride.

— Daniel Cameron