

Think SARS is a problem? Try ‘localitis’.

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We have a touch of SARS”. That’s how a smart Torontonion would put it, and indeed so would anyone who stands to lose money because conventioners, tourists and your Aunt Fanny don’t want to visit our flawed city.

The phrase comes from a young man I read about recently who made the stylish and wonderful remark that he had “a touch of AIDS”. I think this is the right spirit. If only the Americans had maintained a stiff upper lip and said they were suffering from “a touch of terrorism” there would have been no need for the police state with a touch of fascism that they are now building in what they previously proclaimed to be the Land of the Free.

Always minimize problems. Cast things in the best possible light, which is generally quite dim. You don’t want to sound silly, blustering about how sex is better in Toronto than in Buffalo, the Royal York is offering special rates, and you can kinda swim in Lake Ontario because you can’t get salmonella below the neck, maybe.

There’s a name for this kind of hypomania. It’s localitis. Mothers have a version of it. “He was a good boy”, they say as their son is led away for his lethal injection. Localitis is self-love. It’s an illness that you don’t get a touch of. You get it full bore, and I do mean that.

Take author Dawn Rae Downton, who wrote *Diamond: A*

Memoir of 100 Days, about moving to Pictou County in northern Nova Scotia to nurse a friend with cancer. The publisher thought I’d like the book, which I did, because writing a funny, lilted story that combines cancer and misery is like straining a failed cheddar cheese sauce through a sieve. You’re stuck with a pile of little yellow worms that are hard to disguise, but Ms. Downton managed it. I wrote a blurb for the cover.

Now, there’s a *fatwa* against Ms. Downton. There was an outbreak of venom at a local reading and she received what I agree is a threat that would have me boarding the cats and maybe the windows.

She was told at the library reading “There’s going to be consequences. You could be surprised.” It was very menacing, and it was suggested that she had crossed the line, whatever that line might be. The library had alerted police before the reading and had extra staff there. She had to come in the back door.

Pictou County people say they have been made to look like hicks. I’m sorry, but you are hicks. So what? It’s a hell of a lot more entertaining than faking being a Toronto sophisticate.

Any rural area with drunken deer hunters is going to lure chain-saw salesmen and the like. It is hardly going to attract whip-thin artists producing raw sausages from their bottoms, smearing them with ketchup and eating them, as did Paul McCarthy, the fashionable American

artist who is about to thrill London with his Tate Modern show. Pictou isn’t going to get the video of Mr. McCarthy beating himself up or even his diorama of a man with dropped trousers humping a tree.

No, Pictou, to its credit, would have attracted Mr. McCarthy in his early artistic phase when he installed smoke alarms for a living. Fortunate Pictou! If they didn’t like Ms. Downton, think of the fuss if they had seen Mr. McCarthy performing “This sausage is a Pictou bumpkin”, he would snarl. Come back, Dawn Rae, they would be saying.

As usual, I’m the mystified onlooker. I’ve moved a lot. Like a biographer who discovers that his subject was a plagiarist, I find my pattern is to love a place initially and become fast disenchanted. I do it with cities; other people do it with wives.

I’m, sick of Toronto with its litter, its hideous multiplexes and endless chain stores, thuggish police force, overpriced restaurants, sewer lake and babbling twice-elected mayor. As the dashing General Phil Sheridan said of Texas, “If I owned Texas and hell, I would rent out Texas and live in hell.”

For Texas, substitute Toronto. It doesn’t bother me. I don’t care if you insult Newfoundlanders either. Those people are too beautiful to care.

Immune to nationitis, I don’t mind if you mock Canada. I sometimes think that cloud of chloroform

that Ms. Downton said had descended on Pictou County is nationwide.

I once wrote a perfectly straightforward article about my home town of Kapuskasing, Ont. I was pilloried in the local rag and my boss got phone calls from people who truly believed Kap was the Bilbao of Northern Ontario. All I said was that the place stank from the pulp mill and we smoked a lot of dope. On the plus side, the folks were nice, I had a happy adolescence and I got out. To Toronto. The joke was on me.

Localitis is out of date. Hateful modern economics mean that few people get to choose where they live. They follow their jobs. So why should they love the dot on the map where some guy in head office shoved a red stickpin?

The angriest locals are the ones who never left the city or town where they grew up. They are as one with Hicksville. I have sometimes wondered what it would have been like to stay put. Would it have been a place of infinite safety and comfort? Or a daily reminder of my cowardice, which I would block out by threatening intelligent women whose words are published?

Localitis sufferers say they hate Ms. Downton. But they really hate themselves.