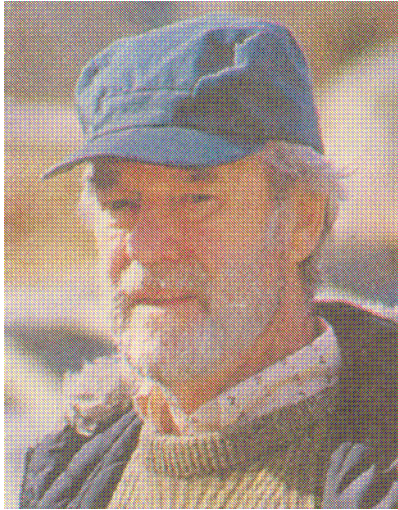


# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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## Why my mom gives *Shipping News* two thumbs down

DAWN RAE DOWNTON



**Gordon Pinsent: But surely, b'y, he could have set them all straight about flipper pie?**

I took my mother to *The Shipping News*. It was a mistake. Born on the cusp of the Depression into a northern outpost severed from the world by ice half the year, my mother is a veteran of Newfoundland, of hardship. And she's not romantic about it in the least.

Not romantic like Kevin Spacey and Julianne Moore and director Lasse Hallstrom, in their blockbuster film that opened for the sentimental among us, on Christmas Day.

Not romantic like the novelist E. Annie Proulx was, insofar as she conjured up a resurrection of sorts right there on the rocks for her hapless hero Quoyle, whose story *The Shipping News* is. Not romantic like the reviewers who gush over the film's haunting landscapes, its jaw-dropping cliffs, its heart-stopping sunsets and redemptive salt sprays.

Newfoundland, say the Newfoundlanders, was never like this.

The reviewers are, in fact, so romantic about the film's vistas that they've dreamed them up. Did they see the movie I did? The Newfoundland of Hallstrom and his cinematographer Oliver Stapleton is not comely at all. Not strange-pretty, not fogbound chic, not eerie, misty, moody, arcane. The Newfoundland of *The Shipping News* does not smolder with the subtext of falling dark. No pastel secrets of nature shining here, no monochromes of a dimming, nostalgic past.

Nope, this Newfoundland's just ugly as hell, with battered cars and grey rocks in close-up, with mud and peeling paint. Can no one find a middle ground?

Stapleton is a veteran of MTV videos and gritty Stephen Frears dramas like *Prick up Your Ears* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the first a grisly biopic about gay-bashing set in and out of public loos in London, the second a violent record of racial tension in London's Thatcher-era inner cities.

In *The Shipping News*, there's a glimpse of a child climbing a hill toward a ghost house, Quoyle's house, at dusk, in the gloaming. There is nothing else like it in the entire film. All is musty, drear, tacky, cheap – and pretty well rusted out.

But my mother is used to that, people saying one thing about Newfoundland – it's beautiful – when they mean another: it's not the suburbs, it's not where we live.

My mother is not bothered by the doublespeak. Newfoundlanders do not "screech in," they don't kiss cod. That's an invention of the tourist industry, for

tourists. If it gets American greenbacks in the door, bring it on.

But my mother is troubled by the flipper pie, stricken by it. In *The Shipping News*, flipper pie looks Stouffer's-ish, a flat wedge of mince between two pale crusts, yours for a buck from some roadside stand. Wrapped in a bit of cellophane, it could have come cold and stale from a vending machine, with packets of ketchup.

In the movie, flipper pie is, of course, the butt of a sweet joke between Quoyle and his local love, his redemptress, played by Julianne Moore. Back in their Depression outpost, my mother's father was particular about his scoff, and her mother was a good cook, whether or not the coastal boats got in through the slob ice with the winter's flour, whether or not the family had run out of credit. Back in the outpost, flipper pie was a deep-dish stew that you spooned out from under a single golden top crust. In the outpost, no one had hair the colour of Julianne Moore's, unless you tripped while pitching the beet water out the back door and spilled it over your head.

# ‘They might all have tried speaking less Hallmark’

My mother can’t understand why Gordon Pinsent didn’t set the film makers straight about flipper pie, about a lot of things. Gordon Pinsent plays a minor character in the movie. He was born in Grand Falls, yes, b’y; he *was The Rowdyman*. He would have known; he should have said.

Newfoundlanders in *The Shipping News* are reduced to the usual suspects, within a brief, two-note range from sweet simpletons to rowdy drunks. Whenever the TV is on, it’s *Hockey Night in Canada*. Julianne Moore has not been taught to knit; her yarn-overs are more ham-fisted than mine, slow as cold molasses in the film’s eternal dank. Mercifully, she’s shown playing her squeeze box only from the back.

A fisherman guts his catch slow as sludge. “At that rate,” says Mom, “no wonder the fishery failed.” There are no scavenger gulls to be heard on the soundtrack. “Where,” says Mom, “are the gulls? They gave up waiting?”

A bunch of valiants, including women and even a dog, haul Quoyle’s ancestral house by ropes and skids over the ice – through a blizzard. “As if they couldn’t wait for good weather,” my mother leans over in the theatre. At this point, she doesn’t care if she gets shushed. “As if we had no good weather in Newfoundland ever, and not a blade of grass.”

Worst of all, people in this movie are forever wise, in a simple sort of way; forever quirky, apparently so primitively spiritual they are indestructible. They come back to life once they’ve drowned, and Quoyle himself, for all his fear of water, can capsize and float all night in the North Atlantic with merely a nightmare to show for it. None of it is true: The Newfoundlanders die harder than most, and people are no odder there than John Crosbie.

There’s probably not much even Gordon Pinsent could have done to improve Judi Dench’s accent, despite his coaching. Dench plays the crusty aunt with the hidden heart of gold who brings Quoyle home.

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**‘As if we had no good weather in Newfoundland ever, and not a blade of grass.’**

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“At least she doesn’t sound like M in her Bond movies,” says Mom. There isn’t a “Newfoundland accent,” as my mother is fond of pointing out. There are at least eight regional dialects on the coast alone, according to *The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* – and there always seemed to me to be at least eight dialects among my uncles alone.

Since Quoyle is a come-from-the-States, he didn’t need coaching. Kevin Spacey just speaks Kevin Spacey – which, in most of his movies, is pretty close to Quoyle anyway.

“They might have all tried speaking less Hallmark,” says Mom, who is not one with the world of American clichés about Newfoundland.

Ms. Proulx, from Connecticut, herself made trip after trip to Newfoundland, camping or bunking in B and B’s. She haunted kitchens and boat yards, listening. For names, she read local telephone books and corner-store bulletin boards. She studied *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.

“This is the point in work,” she has said. “You get it right, or you don’t do it. Everything depends on your getting it right.”

*Dawn Rae Downton’s family memoir, Seldom, about her mother’s childhood in Newfoundland, will be published by McClelland & Stewart this spring.*