

Memories of an Old World: Michael Crummey's *Sweetland*

Michael Crummey's novel *Sweetland* takes readers into the life of a hardened islander and the rock that he calls home. The novel's protagonist Moses Sweetland is a determined, stubborn character who struggles to come to terms with the changing world around him. Sweetland is a figure who embodies the island that shares his name. Like the island, he has been hardened over the years by a harsh climate and the inevitable challenges of living life in isolation. Despite this, Sweetland is able to endure most of the obstacles that come his way. However, when faced with the prospect of relocation, Sweetland is unable to shake free of the grip the island has on him. By beautifully weaving tales of the past and present, Crummey shows readers the power that our memories have over us and how our history can affect our ability to move forward.

Throughout the novel, we are presented with numerous flashbacks to an alternate storyline that took place in the distant past that help fill holes in the story and slowly reveal why Sweetland has become the man he is in the present timeline. We learn of his sister Ruthie and her affair with the Reverend, something that Sweetland discovered but never spoke of. We learn of his trip to Toronto and the accident that left him unable to father a child. We learn of his brother's death and how he blames himself for what happened all those years ago. We learn of Effie Priddle, Queenie Coffin, and the romances that never were. Critics might say that the novel becomes over-reliant on these flashbacks; however they are an integral part of the main character's development. By flashing back multiple times throughout the story, Crummey turns Sweetland into a sympathetic figure that juxtaposes the harsh, stubborn character we are

initially introduced to. We see that Moses is a man who is filled with pain and regret when looking back on the relationships he had with those who are no longer in his life. These memories leave him “plagued and preoccupied by past moments of inertia” (Chafe, 18). He is a man who could have said more but chose not to and now must live in the bed he made. These flashbacks also help show us that the most intimate relationship Moses ever had is with the island itself (Brinklow, 136). The island is the only thing that shares in these painful memories with Sweetland and this only increases the hold the island has on the man. Sweetland is unable to leave the past and those he lost behind him, and as the story goes on, we see how his memories prevent him from moving on when the rest of the community leaves the island.

Even though Sweetland is hesitant to let go of the past and leave his homeland, he isn't entirely opposed to the changes that inevitably come for the island. Electricity arrives in the 1970s, bringing the community of Chance Cove into the 21st century (Brinklow, 137). Later, the internet comes along and Sweetland passes the days playing online poker and skyping with his great-nephew Jesse. Sweetland forms a tight bond with Jesse, who has been diagnosed with autism, and the two become each other's “reason to get up in the morning” (Crummey “Class Lecture”). Jesse is Sweetland's primary connection to the new world and the only person who is able to get the old man to change his ways (Crummey “Class Lecture”). Like Sweetland, Jesse lives his life “stranded on the island of his own peculiar self” (Brinklow, 136). He also conjures up an unsettling connection to Sweetland's past in the form of his dead brother Hollis. Jesse claims he can see Hollis and frequently talks to the dead man. Jesse is constantly bringing up the past and eventually gets Sweetland to share the story of what happened the day Hollis died. Sweetland reveals how he holds himself accountable for his mis-guided decision to cut the line

of the trawl that pulled Hollis into the depths of the ocean and led to his death. After recounting this trauma, Sweetland has a change of heart and decides to accept the government's offer and leave the island. This sudden change in plans comes as a shock to Jesse, and leads to the youngsters disappearance. Again this is an example of Crummey using the past to play a crucial, and this time a tragic role in the events of the present. Sweetland struggles to live with the things that happened and is hesitant to leave them behind. Jesse is also opposed to leaving the island and when he hears that Sweetland has suddenly changed his mind, the youngster is unable to understand what is happening. Sweetland's decision to accept the government payout was done so as a way of ensuring a better fate for Jesse than what the island could offer (Crummey "Class Lecture"). Therefore, it is a great irony that this decision ultimately leads to Jesse's death. Sweetland finally found a reason to leave his past behind and adapt to the new ways; however, once Jesse passes he longer feels that same pull from the new world. Sweetland goes right back to his old mindset and lets his past trauma consume him once again.

All of these traumas that Sweetland encounters eventually lead to him losing his grip on reality. When the rest of the island's inhabitants are packing up and heading to the mainland, Sweetland, instead, chooses to fake his own death so he can discreetly stay behind. This marks the beginning of his descent into chaos as he "traverses an uncertain space once he becomes the sole occupant of Sweetland" (Chafe, 26). Moses begins to see lights on in the neighboring houses of the cove, he imagines conversations with people who aren't there, and witnesses a congregation of ghosts pass by. Critics may feel that the novel becomes too metafictional in the second half. As the line between memory and reality becomes blurred, readers even struggle to pinpoint the exact moment that Sweetland's life comes to an end. This uncertainty plays an

important role however, as it takes readers into the delusional state of mind that engulfs Sweetland. We see how his obsession with the past leads to him losing track of the present. Sweetland's inability to move forward in life and his failure to find a way to exist in the new world leads to him being erased off the map entirely. Rather than moving to the mainland and continuing his life with the living, Moses instead chooses to stay behind and end his life with the dead. "It is only when Moses leaves Chance Cove to join the fluid movement of this congregation that he suddenly feels at home" (Chafe, 30).

Michael Crummey gives us a novel that explores the powerful hold that time and place can have on a person. For Moses Sweetland, the island represents the only home he's ever known. The complex relationships he's had with those who lived and died there become a part of his identity. He turns into a man that is unable to remove himself from the island, the stories told there, and the pain suffered by those who called the place home. He becomes a part of the land but fails to make those same connections with his fellow human beings in the community. In the end, this leaves him lost and stranded on an island of his own making. By incorporating stories from the past and present, and blurring the lines between memory and reality, Crummey provides readers with a memorable story of what happens to someone who commits themselves to a life of isolation.

Works Cited

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