

ANNA JAKABFI

A CRIMINAL STORY ENIGMA IN CANADIAN FICTION:  
RUDY WIEBE'S *THE MAD TRAPPER* (1980)

The true story of an unidentified man by the name of Albert Johnson has become a legend. His stealing of an Indian's trappings, his shooting of a policeman followed by a manhunt in the Canadian North, and his subsequent death at the hands of the RCMP in the winter of

1931–32 were pieces of news in contemporary media, mostly because for the first time in human history it was the airplane that prevented the escape of the culprit. The unlikely story amidst the harsh elements of the Northern winter in Canada inspired the creation of several songs, poems, longer and shorter pieces of fiction, and even a movie. These days you can find several home pages on the internet that all relate in a documentary way what happened in the early days of 1932.

Rudy Wiebe was gradually led into the writing of the novel by first creating a short story in diary form under the title of *The Naming of Albert Johnson*. Wiebe's novel *The Mad Trapper* (1980) is more than a crime story, more than a historical record (*The Fiddlehead* 101–4)—indeed it seems not to be according to many critics: professional geographers and policemen—it is an artistic creation. Certain characters and some turns in the story were curbed to serve the artistic targets aimed at by Rudy Wiebe.

The enigmas deliberately maintained in the novel and still unsolved after 50 years—at the time of the writing of *The Man Trapper*—are: who was the man that repudiated the law by not taking a license to entrap animals, what was his motivation to do so, why did he consent to the identity of another man unknown, supposed and attributed to him, and why did he kill a policeman instead of negotiating as initiated by the police force.

Not one of the artistic creations offered to solve the mystery, instead they all built their story around the secrets surrounding the case. From these artistic works certainly stands out Rudy Wiebe's (1934–) novel *The Mad Trapper* published in 1980. The title term *The Mad Trapper* refers to the man who accepted his given identity by the name of Albert Johnson and as the story unfolds, the reader feels that the policemen become more and more entrapped in the situation and act as if driven by some sort of madness to chase Albert Johnson in the temperature of 40–50 Celsius below zero amidst cruel blizzards. So the term 'the mad trapper' refers more and more also to the posse in chase of the culprit. (Keith, 1981; 115–6) The manhunt eventually succeeds, Albert Johnson is killed after a prolonged chase.

20th century technology, the new element of viewing the earth's surface from above, a new angle, a new dimension changes man's situation on earth forever. The criminal on the escape cannot escape, law will be applied, and the criminal will be allotted his due punishment; he is killed. Conclusion: the individual that invented technology is confronted with it and modern technology ultimately wins and the reader can understand why death will become a decisive element in the 20th century, even if this book may serve as a symbolic beginning to what is coming later in time. (*Canadian Literature* 1984, 354.)

The other new element besides the appearance and active cooperation of the airplane is the presence of the media, the press. Policemen have a complicated task, a hard challenge to face: not only to punish the man, but also to please the media and assist them in communicating the police case to the public. In order to do so politicians in the capital, Ottawa have a say in the matter. With an eye on the increasing costs of the manhunt they decide eventually that a plane should be involved and that the media should be physically present in the final phase of the manhunt to communicate the story authentically to the public. What started as a local infringement of the law, ends as a globally broadcast, sensational series of news that keeps the public alert all over the world in early 1932. 20th century technology enlarges the matter by keeping the public interest focussed on the fate of this mad trapper called Albert Johnson.

Rudy Wiebe's novel reflects faithfully the new world of the 20th century where technology begins to play a decisive role.

The novel entitled *The Mad Trapper* puts man and man's physical endurance into focus by showing how physical endurance is stretched and pushed to never experienced limits. This process is illustrated also by a

handful of artistic devices: in Wiebe's novel the manhunt is prolonged in time by about a fortnight, during which time a fictitious character, another policeman, Paul Thomson is killed by the culprit to increase the tension and to keep up (*The Fiddlehead*, 101–4.) the reader's attention. Another artistic device is to give the man a kind of identity by making him smile all by himself (Wiebe, 1980; 44), by making him sing to himself: 'Never smile at a woman, Call no man your friend. If you trust anybody, you'll be sorry...you'll be sorry...you'll be sorry in the end.' (48)—he sings. The fact that he regularly takes and buys kidney pills in a great quantity belongs to the identity of this strange man. (31). He also has a lot of cash, a large pack of banknotes carefully kept hidden on his body (33.) Also the reader learns that this strange, solitary man has been living alone for the past 15 years (36), and he notices Nersyoo's, the Indian's wife and looks strangely at her which does not go unnoticed either to Nersyoo or Constable Millen.(34) Indians when they first see the man reflect on him saying: 'Looks like another poor white bugger.' (21) Later Nersyoo approaches the man in a friendly way and asks him an unusual personal question for an Indian by inquiring where he came from. And the man answers: "“You saw me. Down the river.” He said like iron.' Nersyoo even looks at and tries the man's rifle and states that it is good (54), the only human communication that the strange man has with another human being in the novel.

A kind of past is built up for Albert Johnson by making him possess three photos about three persons: one young man and one old man in a fishing boat in a harbour, and a young woman. He muses over the photos twice in the course of the manhunt. The second time the man looks at the photos in remembering his past he burns the photos, this way he prevents to leave any trace after him. So we have a fairly accurate picture of this strange man whose past and motivations are left, however, in the dark. By creating the two scenes with the photos Rudy Wiebe leads the reader into the thoughts of the protagonist. This way the novelist counterbalances the overbearing portrayal of the policemen's thoughts, dialogues and actions, and attempts to give the strange man some special traits that make him an unmistakable individual, a special human being as a result of artistic creation.

Tension is being built up carefully and gradually as the actions of Albert Johnson are growing in proportion to the invading cold winter. First the strange man is strange because he appears out of nowhere and all by himself. As the Northern cold increases and blizzards are growing in

number and forcefulness, so is the tension between the two parties: the solitary Albert Johnson's solitude is becoming overwhelming and the posse in his chase is growing in number. The climax is the appearance of the airplane to track down the culprit. And the *dénouement* is the ultimate downfall of the culprit, the man of false identity, and his simultaneous killing of Millen, the policeman engaged in the manhunt right from the beginning. The message is clear: the individual cannot win against the community. The reader is kept at suspense and some of us may even be tempted to feel for the culprit as his human side is revealed in certain scenes referred to previously. Not to fall into the trap of feeling sorry for him, he in the end, as a last effort kills his policeman adversary.

The reader is kept at suspense right from the start by also witnessing the fury, the rage in the man trapper. 'The rage in Johnson's face was like a hammer blow over his head: impossible to say a word against. My God, Douglas thought, my god. What's the matter with him.' (Wiebe, 1980; 32.) This aggressiveness is growing in proportions as the story unfolds from not registering for a trapping license into intruding on Nersyoo's trap followed by shooting a policeman then later in the manhunt killing two more of his pursuers. The motivation of the rage is left unexplained, another enigma. Why is this man depicted as furious with humans? What motivates that rage? However as the manhunt is growing in proportions, and the cold in the Northern winter intensifies, the man's initial fury is gradually transformed into the physical effort to escape and survive, though the man must be aware of the hopelessness of his situation. Otherwise he would not burn the family photos, the only personal clue to his identity in Rudy Wiebe's novel. Does the man fear right from the beginning that his identity be found out either in his life or after his death? He seems to want to evade that possibility. The enigma is why?

Another artistic device Rudy Wiebe applies is a set of contrasts. A contrast is that as the culprit's initial rage subsides in the tedious process of the escape, Millen's and the other policemen's bitterness is growing along with the cold and their determination to put an end to this tedious job in the trace of the culprit; the policemen's moods vary between being joyful and being absolutely determined to apply the law to the culprit. In the warm human atmosphere of Aklavik the policemen are joyful in the dance scenes yet they are determined to kill humans when duty calls them, a contrast again. They do not spare themselves in the cold winter of the Canadian North. Duty comes first and duty is to be performed by all means. Law and order are to be maintained. Joyfulness is replaced by

determination to carry out duty. The safe inside space is changed for the unsafe space of outside that man's duty should defeat. Contrast is applied to the culprit who first in the safety of his own log cabin kills and thus uses the safety of his space not for joy but for committing death. Another contrast between the policemen and the criminal! Joy is combined with community feeling in the case of the policemen whereas the later culprit appears as a 'silent, solitary stranger on the raft in the river.' (*Revue d'études canadiennes*, 71) The strange man who just appeared in the region and identified as Albert Johnson is molesting another man's trap, which is his strangest and least reasonable action of a man who seeks isolation, freedom from his past in the wilderness of the Arctic, a very strange contrast to start with. This foreshadows that this man not only antagonises community but as an individual he is ultimately to be defeated as he is in for a bad cause.

Another artistic device and a folktale element as well is the usage of sets of the number three: the culprit has 3 pictures of 3 people, he is sought out in his log cabin 3 times by the police, and it is 3 times that Millen's life is spared before he is killed in the end; there are 3 policemen in Albert Johnson's trace: Johnson, Millen and Thomson before the posse of numerous policemen set out in the final hunt. In the end, an old Indian woman, again as in folktales and Greek tragedies, foretells Albert Johnson that he will live one more night. These elements of the artistic creation in *The Mad Trapper* indicate that Rudy Wiebe, the writer, the artist is in full control to produce a work of art all through the book.

Another aspect that does not go unnoticed to the European reader is that Albert Johnson is one of the very few anti-heroes in the context of Canadian literature where survival of the protagonist is a central issue. He is the very embodiment of anti-survival. The man called Albert Johnson must have been aware of putting his life into danger by not only not obeying the law but actually challenging it. He is escaping death when at the same time he is seeking it with every action he takes. Another contrast! And another enigma!

Rudy Wiebe's novel is witness to the distinctiveness of thinking between Indians and white men. Because the man called Albert Johnson does not die in the first gunfire, when normally he should have been killed, the Indians call him *wendigo*, an undestroyable, untouchable spirit and would want to leave him to his own devices in the deadly cold of the North in winter. The policemen of white background think differently. They pursue the culprit up to the last moment no matter what the costs in

manpower and finances. By putting the choices of Indians and white man to the reader Rudy Wiebe contemplates and makes also his readers contemplate whether it is worth the effort to hunt to death one man—even if guilty in growing degree—at the price of getting several men killed and many more to suffer for several weeks let alone the enormous financial costs, when winter cold in the Canadian North would have done its job anyway. This enigma could be termed as the enigma of the so-called civilized western man versus North America's indigenous people, the Indians. The reader muses over this incident: who is right?! The Indians' or Canada's law? Nature or modern man's society armed with modern technology? Would not the Indians' notion of the *wendigo* eventually have brought more reason into the manhunt? The result would have been the same except the costs would have been smaller. Why bother beyond a certain point? Why not sit back and let nature take its course both in manpower and in finances?

Conclusion: Rudy Wiebe created a true ballad in prose of the Arctic in Canada with a classic figure in the centre of action who is doomed. This bleak story is so singularly Canadian because it reflects Canadian reality of the 1930's when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police RCMP is in full swing in keeping law and order even in the sparsely populated regions like the North-West, when technology plays its role, when keeping track of every individual—good and bad—is part of Canada's modern history, when the individual cannot oppose the community, on the contrary should be part of it, and Canadian is the deadly cold of winter where survival is possible only if one lives in the spirit of law and order.

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