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### ***Come By Chance*: a gently compelling narrative podcast about fractured family and identity in a small Canadian community.**

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#### **Abstract**

Newfoundland is ‘a chunk of rock about the size of Iceland,’ says Luke Quinton, host of CBC’s podcast serial *Come By Chance*. ‘Newfoundland may be just off the coast of Canada, but culturally, it’s a world removed, and it’s not a place that gives up its secrets easily.’ This review of *Come By Chance*’s seven episodes argues the series has muscular writing, strong character depiction and a tight narrative structure missing from many recent podcast serials, as Quinton proceeds to tease out some of those secrets, framed by a fateful incident involving two baby boys, Clarence Hynes and Craig Avery, that changed their lives forever.

#### **Keywords**

investigative podcast, Canada, true life, mystery

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*Luke Quinton, host of Come By Chance. Artwork by Nitin Fernandes.*

Newfoundland is ‘a chunk of rock about the size of Iceland,’ says Luke Quinton, host of *Come By Chance*, in the podcast’s opening moments. ‘Newfoundland may be just off the coast of Canada, but culturally, it’s a world removed, and it’s not a place that gives up its secrets easily.’ Over seven episodes, Quinton proceeds to tease out some of those secrets, paying particular attention to two families intertwined by a fateful incident involving two baby boys, Clarence Hynes and Craig Avery.

The plot is fairly obvious from the start: the opening montage ends with Craig Avery declaring flatly, ‘I didn’t ask for this life. Somebody made me have it. Someone sent me somewhere where I wasn’t supposed to be. It’s changed my life forever.’ So it’s not much of a spoiler to reveal that Craig and Clarence were switched at birth, their mothers sent home with the wrong baby. Craig, a big, fair, freckled child, grows up in a family of darker-skinned boys who have the prominent nose and bushy eyebrows of their father. Clarence is the odd one out among his siblings, too.

Quinton and the large production team at CBC and Novel, an independent company based in the UK, mine this twist of fate to probe complex nuances of family relationships, love and identity, set against the elemental backdrop of Newfoundland, whose insularity is metaphoric as well as real. A howling wind

rattles the mic as Quinton explains, 'Newfoundland is one of the windiest places in the world. And sometimes, we wonder why we live here.'

Over a slow build, Quinton sets up the main characters: the feisty, jostling Craig, who's in oil rig construction, and his wife Tracey, a practical, observant woman who works as a cleaner. 'Craig is a big guy with strong, broad shoulders, thin moustache. Tracey Avery has short hair, big eyes and is quick to smile.' It's Tracey who notices how closely a welding supervisor at the oil rig, Clarence, resembles Craig's older brother Clifford. When she discovers that Craig and Clarence were born on the same day in the same small hospital at the town of Come By Chance, it sets off a quest that illuminates poignant and intimate moments in the life of this earthy community. Clarence, a quiet, self-effacing type, does not want to stir the pot. 'I didn't want to know. I didn't want no part of it.' Clifford, his lookalike, is an endearing extrovert whose comic turns mask a dark past. In one lovely scene (Episode Three), his daughters demonstrate Clifford's party trick – a made-up 'bricklayer's dance' that mimics his work as a mason. 'He built on an outdoor patio so we could have an outdoor dance floor', recalls Clifford's daughter, Stephanie.

As host, Quinton is a likeable but low-key presence. Unlike many current investigative podcast hosts, he does not dominate the story. Rather, he is a conduit to the families, seeking to help us empathise with their sensitivities and shifting circumstances. As the story deepens and tragedy unfolds, Quinton handles interviews with delicacy, cutting out his own voice and placing family members centre stage. Here, Craig Avery reflects on the moment he first steps inside the house belonging to his biological family:

You go into the house where you should have grown up knowing that this is where your family lived and your parents lived and you should have been there too, it takes the heart right out of you knowing that they grew up there and you didn't and you should have.

Tight narrative structure is key to taut episodic storytelling. Perhaps because audio is relatively cheap to make, narrative podcasts sometimes serve up repetitive, self-indulgent ramblings in need of a ruthless prune. *The Teacher's Pet*, a titillating true crime hit from Australia that cannibalised its own episodes, is one example. Even otherwise well produced series can pall without rigorous

editing. *Inconceivable Truth* by WYNC reporter Matt Katz has a promising premise – Katz seeks to find out who his biological father is after he learns he was conceived by donor. While there is much to like in the podcast, including warm scenes with Katz’s mother and new-found half-siblings, the pace flags due to Katz’s constant reprising. *Come By Chance* gets the balance right. Sure, tropes are repeated (the physical likeness between Clarence and Clifford, the Avery nose), but they are carefully deployed to aid narrative flow. Scripting varies between brief links that set up a scene or an interview grab and rich word pictures that bring the raw landscape and gritty community to vibrant, 3-D life. Take this opening scene from Episode Three:

The orange nose of the ship cuts through the thick fog, entering the narrows at St. John's Harbour. Five stories high, it slows to a crawl and turns to pull alongside the dock, next to towering cranes, in the shadow of small office towers and wooden houses on the hills. Thick ropes are tossed from the vessel and held to the shore. Workers, about 30, gather on the rail as the silver gangway is lowered. They're looking worn after a three-week shift aboard the Hibernia oil platform in the North Atlantic. It usually takes 90 minutes in a helicopter to get home, but with the chopper sucked in by the weather, this is the backup plan. They've been at sea for 16 hours in the white bank of fog. Inching closer at this moment are two men unknown to each other. The gangway is lowered to the asphalt, and workers in orange safety suits begin to file back down to earth, to their homes and families. As the next group of 30 stands by chatting and making last minute phone calls, these two men catch sight of each other. They walk slower, heads pivoting ever so slightly to keep the other in view. One of these men is Clifford Avery, and the other is Clarence Hynes.

The Avery/Hynes DNA question is settled finally in Episode Four – with three episodes still to run. Given this strong sense of a natural conclusion, I wondered how successfully the podcast could execute a major story turn to examine the broader question of babies getting mixed up. I need not have worried. Episode Five introduces Mildred, another woman sent home with the wrong baby – though the mistake was quickly rectified. We also meet an X-ray technician who worked at *Come By Chance* hospital at the time. He describes how it was so under-

resourced, there were seven babies for only four bassinets – surplus babies had to be kept in milk crates. The episode portrays a key nurse of the era, before moving to a new story beat – Craig has written to the Premier seeking an explanation. The episode ends with a cliffhanger: another mother has had her baby switched, this time a girl. Episode Six opens with admirable economy:

It's Spring in Triton, a community on the shores of Green Bay, about four hours by car from Come By Chance. The sun is hitting icebergs in the harbor, and we're here to meet Ruth Lush, a smiley woman in her mid-70s.

The episode charts the discovery by a woman called Caroline, that the family she grew up in is not in fact her biological one - Ruth is her real mother and she has sisters too. Their joyful reunion provides the meat of the episode, but it ends with a counterpointing emotional note: what happened to the other daughter, the one raised by Ruth by mistake? Her name: Arlene. Episode Seven opens with a sad, powerful scene:

**LUKE QUINTON:** Just because we're doing this over the phone, how would you describe yourself, say, if someone were to look at you in the mirror?

**ARLENE:** If somebody was to look at me in the mirror and describe me, they would look at me and be like, wow, you got a lot of tattoos. I would say 400, maybe 450 tattoos. I have my neck tattooed. Like I have the bottoms of my feet tattooed. I don't think any of my siblings that I grew up with has a tattoo.

**LUKE QUINTON:** What drives you, do you think, to get those?

**ARLENE:** I think I like the pain, to be honest with you.

Arlene's tough, Bad Girl attitude doesn't disguise her anguish. Interviewing draws it out and judicious editing makes it crystal clear.

**ARLENE:** She said, Arlene, I got some news. I found my real daughter. I'm like, what are you going on with, mom? I found my real daughter.

These voices resonate with authenticity, partly due to heartfelt emotion, but also because of their distinctive Newfoundland diction. A woman unselfconsciously

describes how she got a 'hemail' telling her the news. Other speakers use Hiberno-English idioms familiar to me from my native Ireland: 'He was after seeing the doctor', meaning 'he had seen the doctor'. (The Irish settled in Newfoundland centuries ago and strong Irish accents are discernible still.)

As finale, the series brings back the voices of Craig Avery and Clarence Hynes, as they and other misplaced babies petition parliament for redress. We leave Craig outside the little cottage hospital where it all began – a perfect cyclical ending.

**LUKE QUINTON:** When I first met Craig, I wasn't sure what to expect. The wind was blowing a gale that day, as if it was trying to blow his house down. How do you ask someone you've never met to talk about the worst thing that ever happened to them? What was this burly guy going to say? One of the first things Craig said was that he wanted us to get the story right. Don't wrap this up in a bow, he told me. Don't call it a happy ending because there isn't one. As I stand months later with Craig, outside of what's left of the old Cottage Hospital in Come By Chance trying to make sense of it all, a bitter wind is picking up, pushing through our summer coats. It's June, but it's been so cold that everyone's calling it June-uary.

**SOUNDCLIP**

**LUKE QUINTON:** At this one location, your paths crossed and never uncrossed.

**CRAIG AVERY:** Yeah, in this little town of Come By Chance. I look at that building and I just wish that there were some answers there, and I know there isn't. Look there all you want and you'll never get no answers.

**LUKE QUINTON:** Even if some explanation is discovered, what happened inside this building can never fully be made right.

**SOUNDCLIP**

**CRAIG AVERY:** There's a million questions that's in my head that will never be answered. Where would I be and what would I be doing?

**LUKE QUINTON:** Is there a way to kind of put that to rest? You know, like for you, was there a way that you can stop spinning and spiraling and thinking about all the whole life that you could have been living?

**CRAIG AVERY:** That'll never go away. That'll never go away. I've shed millions of tears over it. I still am. I could now if I let myself go.

**LUKE QUINTON:** You're holding back.

**CRAIG AVERY:** Yeah.

As Craig requested, there is no neat ending – and the series is much the stronger for resisting cloying sentimentality. Its emotional heft is masterfully supported throughout by a palette of tonally apt music whose placement is beautifully judged. It amplifies the deeply personal revelations at the heart of the series, allows space for story beats to sink in and knits the narrative into a cohesive whole. Music is by Adam Foran, with sound design and scoring by Daniel Kempson.<sup>1</sup> The CBC production team includes noted senior executives such as Veronica Simmons (*Alone: A Love Story*, *Tai Asks Why*) and Chris Okes (*Goodbye To All This*), while Novel have made the impressive series *The Girlfriends*. Looking at Novel's website for this piece, I was surprised and delighted to see a fulsome tribute to Newfoundland's most eminent audio feature maker, Chris Brookes, who died last year [after a fall](#). Brookes was an enthusiastic and engaged presence at the annual International Feature Conference (now rebadged as the [Audio Storytelling Festival](#)), keen to offer a critical, attuned ear and mentor a new generation of audio storytellers.<sup>2</sup> Chris Brookes would no doubt applaud *Come By Chance*'s tender, evocative and unsparing treatment of his beloved Newfoundland.

### ***Come By Chance***

7 Episodes, 24.15-32.30mins duration. <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/1430-come-by-chance>

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<sup>1</sup> Kempson studied film at Goldsmiths University in London – an institution long associated with excellent audio storytelling, in the hands of teachers such as *RadioDoc Review*'s own Tim Crook, emeritus professor there, and Alan Hall, founder of noted UK indie production company, Falling Tree Productions. How sadly ironic that Goldsmiths has recently announced the cancellation of its legendary MA program in radio, founded by Crook.

<sup>2</sup> To this end, he contributed an [insightful analysis](#) of a Prix Italia-winning French feature, *Qui a Connu Lolita* (Who Killed Lolita) to *RadioDoc Review*. The journal published a [scholarly critique](#) by Jeanti St Clair of *Consent – walk the walk*, a geo-locative audio documentary walk by Brookes and Emily Denning that examined a sexual assault case in St Johns, Newfoundland. It also published a [tribute](#) by Angela Antle after Brookes' death in 2023.

Produced by Novel for CBC. Written and produced by Luke Quinton, and produced and edited by Jo Wheeler. Assistant producer Madeleine Parr. Field producer Rebecca Nolan. Sound design and scoring Daniel Kempson. Digital coordinating producer Roshini Nair. Original music by Adam Foran. Music supervision by Jo Wheeler and Nicholas Alexander. Senior producers Veronica Simmons, Willow Smith and Daemon Fairless. Production managers Charlotte Wolfe, Sherrie Hewson and Sarah Tobin. The series was developed by Madeline Parr. Creative Director of Development at Novel Willard Foxton. Fact checker Valerio Rocca.

### **Author Details**

Siobhán McHugh is a seminal podcast studies scholar and multi-award-winning producer of narrative journalism podcasts, who founded [RadioDoc Review](#) to develop critical analysis of crafted audio storytelling. Her book, *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (Columbia University Press 2022) analyses the aesthetics and production practices of acclaimed narrative podcasts. She has published widely on the affective power of audio storytelling and the impact of podcasting as a new medium. Narrative podcasts Siobhán co-produced include *The Greatest Menace*, about a gay prison experiment in Australia, which has won 17 major awards, while her other investigative podcasts have won six gold awards at New York Festivals.