

Joanne Soper-Cook. *Waterborne.*

Derek Yetman

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A number of small flaws mar the book, including an errant photo (Figure 96). Stronger editorial guidance might also have expunged the repetitive summaries that characterize each chapter. These faults aside, this is an engaging read and one that adds an important piece in the larger tapestry of our regional past.

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Joanne Soper-Cook. *Waterborne*. Goose Lane Editions, Fredericton, NB, 2002, ISBN 0864923074

THE UNTEMPERED EXUBERANCE of Joanne Soper-Cook's earlier work has evolved into a maturity of voice that is both compelling and enticing. Her characters are complex and finely drawn and her descriptions of the sea, with its mysteries and miracles, are lyrical. The frequent use of metaphor is forgivable for its tautly visual quality ("the old cracked roads that lead back from Elsinore like corrupted veins racing away from a diseased heart"), and the weaving of real and surreal elements is handled deftly.

The novel lays bare the lives of three generations of troubled women who are sheltered, imprisoned and repulsed by a small Newfoundland outpost. There are many secrets here, sexual and emotional abuse among them, and there exists a palpable frigidity to the town and its inhabitants ("it always seemed to be winter in Elsinore"). The women are bound to each other by birth and by the ocean, in circumstances and with consequences not fully understood by them or by the reader until the closing chapters, if at all. The relationships of grandmother, mother and daughter, among themselves and others, are fractured and destructive. Personal demons manifest themselves in startling and disturbing ways, particularly in Stella Maris, the granddaughter.

Stella is by turns bulimic, self-mutilating, cross-dressing, socially isolated, sexually confused, drug dependent and so on. Her astonishing array of problems, phobias and compulsions challenges credibility, at a point in the novel when she has been established as a believable and sympathetic character. Her clear, reasoned voice, even as she engages in these behaviours, jars slightly. The reader is well aware that she is a deeply troubled, wounded individual, and for good reason, without the extremes that begin to render her a cliché of the traumatized psyche.

Soper-Cook is a writer with something to say, in a voice that becomes stronger as she progresses through the inevitable unevenness of an early career. Her work has never lacked for courage or uniqueness, and *Waterborne* marks the addition of a maturity that may carry her far in the world of Canadian letters.

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