

## Kathleen Winter, *Annabel*

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ing both traditional chief (conferred by the Mi'kmaq Grand Chief) and, over the years, administrative chief (elected biennially)" (xiii). Some confusion does surface here, but this is a slight concern. Overall, the book is a captivating and lovely read as it resonates with the power and fluidity of the spoken voice and as it details the life of a man and community well worth listening to. Mi'sel Joe, Raoul R. Anderson and John Crellin deserve thanks and credit.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See Megan Coles, *hey girl* (St. John's: Stone Cold Press, 2006) and Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe, *Muinji'j Becomes a Man* (St. John's: Breakwater, 2003).

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Kathleen Winter, *Annabel*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-802170-82-8.

I WRITE THIS AS *ANNABEL* is nominated for yet another award, this time the Governor General's. There is no question it is the flavour of the year. Even if it wins none of the awards for which it has been nominated, it may have the zeitgeist simply by virtue of its multiple nominations. To paraphrase Sally Fields, "They like it, they like it."

A one-sentence summary of the plot gives part of the reason: an intersex child is born and grows up in Labrador. What more could a jury want? Gender confusion is one of today's favourite issues and the wilderness as a location never goes out of style. Then add in the exoticism of Labrador. (Given this is a Newfoundland publication that might seem ridiculous, but never underestimate the insularity of the mainland: Last summer I phoned Toronto and when the receptionist was informed I was calling from St. John's she said: "Newfoundland! New-found-land. Newfoundland....")

But is it good? To offer my own humble opinion, it is very good. In some ways it is a significant change from Winter's earlier work, whether her columns for the *Evening Telegram* or her stories in *boYs*. As many noted of the latter, Winter seemed at her best as a miniaturist. However, while Wayne/Annabel's life is small, with its focus on Labrador, St. John's and a trip to Boston, the novel is not. This is partly the obvious — its 461 pages — but it is also a matter of style. This is especially true of the prologue, which is enigmatic in the extreme until the reader gets into the body of the novel. In the prologue, the original Annabel and her blind father encounter the white caribou: "it could have been poured from light itself and made of light."

As the novel develops, however, Winter becomes more restrained but remains extremely perceptive and imaginative. When she hits it right, her prose sparkles, often on the smallest things, such as Wayne's appreciation of a lettuce sandwich: "this gave him a new sense that you could strip things down more than his parents had done; a thing like lettuce could sustain you." Perhaps even better are the moments when Winter produces events and objects that are both inevitably real and inevitably symbolic, such as Wayne's bridge. One perhaps surprising success of the novel is Winter's portrayal of Wayne's father, Treadway. All male, with a deep silent understanding of the nature of Labrador (nature in both senses), Treadway is one of those profound characterizations that make you wonder: how could an author of a different gender from a different place create this?

Still, while the novel no doubt would not have achieved such a response without Winter's literary flair, the topic is probably the primary reason for the acclaim. Winter does not engage with the politics of the condition. To my memory, the word "intersex" is not even used in the novel. This is perhaps explained by the Labrador setting and the fact that Wayne is born in 1968 and thus the novel presumably ends in the early nineties. "Intersex" was not a common word then, although it has been in use in biological studies since the early twentieth century. So when Wayne and those around him discover his condition, he is called a "hermaphrodite," which as so many have stated, is poetic, less accurate, and pejorative.

The pejorative part suits the novel, as Wayne must come to accept himself and be accepted, so struggling against a view of himself as a monster is appropriate. The accuracy part is more troubling. There is nothing in the book to suggest that Winter has done much medical research. There is none of the hormonal and chromosomal detail found in, say, Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*. Winter's general portrayal of Wayne fits the condition but Wayne is clearly what is often called a "true hermaphrodite." This is an extremely rare condition, in which a person has both male and female reproductive organs. One reason the term "intersex" has become favoured is that it applies to anyone who has biological sex characteristics that are somewhere between the "normal" male and the "normal" female. It thus encompasses many who are far from that mystical blend of Hermes and Aphrodite.

Not only is Wayne's condition rare, the plot includes one element that is even rarer: he impregnates himself. There is no baby born but he clearly thus crosses over into the most profound realm of the hermaphrodite: the pregnant impregnator. My research has shown that, while there have been many claims that this has happened, none has ever been proven. While this is certainly theoretically possible for a true hermaphrodite, it is unlikely for many reasons. One is simply the nature of our auto-immune systems; but more important is the infertility of many intersex conditions. In essence, the closer an intersex condition comes to the true hermaphrodite, the less likely the person will be fertile as either male or female.

This brings me back to the reason for Wayne's condition in the novel. I just cannot figure out why Winter felt it necessary to justify Wayne's obsessions through bi-

ology. She is deeply interested in gender, as her collection of stories demonstrated, but there is no need to have an intersex condition to explore that. Medical and psychological studies are full of examples of people who have gone through exactly this gender confusion as adolescents without having any discernable biological abnormality. Some have grown up to be transsexual but most have grown up to be gay and a surprising number have grown up to be heterosexual.

To my mind, this would have been a far better novel if Annabel were just a boy, feeling like a girl while growing up in a Labrador that expected boys to be mini-men. Wayne's childhood love of synchronized swimming is such a stereotypical aspect of a gay childhood but Winter describes it tellingly and beautifully.

Gender is confusing for all of us. The man who denies that confusion and says, "I'm just a man," is the truly confused person. Wayne/Annabel is not on this messy voyage because he has ambiguous genitalia but because he understands what a messy voyage it is.

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*Hard Ol' Spot: An Anthology of Atlantic Canadian Fiction.* Selected by Mike Heffernan, Illustrated by Darren Whalen. St. John's: Killick Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-1-897174-48-7.

*HARD OL' SPOT: AN ANTHOLOGY of Atlantic Canadian Fiction* is an anthology comprised of fourteen distinct short stories that explore and probe the dark side of the Maritimes geographically, psychically, and experientially. In Atlantic Canada, a "hard ol' spot" is indicative of a tough place, a dark place, a stagnant place either mentally or physically. The stories in this collection have been selected not only to reflect and represent the geographical danger, sublimity, and physical hardship of life in the Eastern provinces, but also the sense of being trapped by internal forces: desperation, boredom, monotony, and lack of opportunity. The stories are dark in subject, and each is pressurized by nuance and the skillful craft of each writer. There are no monsters in this collection, but there is an unnerving and eerie sense of psychological weight for both the reader and the characters in each tale. A hard ol' spot can be a catalyst for bloodshed and dashed dreams, but also a place of hope and resilience. Atlantic Canadian residents are familiar with the notion of endurance in a part of Canada where the weather is fickle and wild: wooden houses groan under the weight and assault of vicious storms, and the churning ocean seems hungry for human life. In the introduction, Kathleen Winter asserts that the writer must ask not only where darkness comes from, but how long it can endure (vii). The fictions in this anthology suggest that darkness can endure for quite a long time, and in a sense many of these stories are about survival and endurance; the ability and need to find