

## *Hard Ol' Spot: An Anthology of Atlantic Canadian Fiction*

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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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

a way to cope with unforgiving and relentless circumstances or terrain, which is a lonely process.

Gerard Collins' "Break, Break, Break" is a fitting opening for the collection, as it introduces the reader to the claustrophobic way that Newfoundland winters can press upon characters and exert external dominance upon them. The storm in this story seems alive, hostile, and predatory. It terrorizes the narrator and her family as it shakes both their home and their faith. There is a well-crafted relentlessness about this tale that is echoed in its title, the breaking of the ocean waves against cold rock, and the endless, maddening drip of water in a bucket which hints at the vulnerable fragility of one's defences. The narrator admits that the violent winds make her feel like bawling, and she asserts that "it feels like being violated, over and over" (1). The storm is a rapist that robs its victims of autonomy, and in this story place and weather exacerbate the psychological turmoil created by external circumstance: the girl who is abandoned by her boyfriend on Valentine's Day, her little brother who cowers in fright from the gale, and the entire family that fears and prays for a father and husband on the *Ocean Ranger*. The narrator feels completely forsaken in the wake of external forces, yet the plot turns upon the mother's compulsion to confront the storm and frigid ocean, and to stand at the edge of the abyss and face darkness head on. For the narrator, hope becomes renewed through writing, and endurance regains hold.

In stories like Leslie Vryenhoek's "The Chain Around my Neck" and Michelle Butler Hallet's "Eminent Domain," hope is inverted and made negative. In these stories the reader is privy to the hopes and dreams of specific characters, and to the realization that sometimes bad things happen to good people just because they can. For January in Vryenhoek's story, redemption is promised by hard work, an escape from physical geography as well as her mother and troubled sister, to culminate finally in her dream of moving to Paris. However, January's Eiffel Tower charm becomes a talisman not of promise but of the destruction and desecration of dreams, innocence, and hopes. Her sister manages to live January's dream without any effort at all, and the one time she tries to make something interesting happen to her in a boring suburb, January's first experience of love ends in violation. "Eminent Domain" is an intriguing selection because it deals with an experience of Newfoundland from the perspective of a Russian refugee. Here home is an elusive place where the protagonist has no sense of belonging. Instead she experiences a sort of kind tolerance. The narrator's only solace is in the basement of a church, which is the only thing standing between her and deportation to a country where her life is in danger. In this story, hope is a cruel thing, a motivator that leads the protagonist down dangerous and demeaning roads in an attempt to save her brother, who she claims "suffers from hope" (39).

Elizabeth Blanchard's "Drive Thru" and especially Steve Vernon's "A Hole Full of Nothing" explore the complacency and desperation that come with being trapped in the mundane. In Blanchard's story, Penny is a Tim Horton's employee

who is quietly desperate: she is psychologically drawn back to and trapped by the memory of being abandoned by her parents, and is caught in the redundancy of the minute details of her everyday life and her limited options. Vernon's story epitomizes the desperation of boredom in a town where the lack of vitality and opportunity breeds violence and swallows hope. Notably, it is the story from which the anthology takes its name. The narrator's father categorizes life in their rural town as a place with "nothing but lukewarm piss-thin tea, day after goddamn day, you talk about living shit-poor in a damn hard ol' spot" (49). The story repeatedly returns to the image of a hole that is empty or a hole that exists to consume; it is an oblivion that the narrator both rejects and longs for while suffering from what his father calls "maritimer's all the timers" instead of Alzheimer's, "a condition that you get from sitting around with nothing to do and no cash and all of the time in the world to spend it on" (50). However, this is not an entirely undesirable condition in all the stories.

Collins' "Holdout" is a beautifully sad tale about a dying rural community that is offered money from the government to relocate, on the condition that the town's affirmative vote is unanimous. Winnie, one of the town's senior residents, is put in the "hard ol' spot" of being the only resident unwilling to leave the place that holds so many memories for her, and thus the only resident trapping the rest of the town in a situation they deem untenable. Her decision to stop holding out, remaining alone in the village, is brave, touching, scary, sad, and inspiring by turns. Here, hope is beautifully maintained even as the circumstances around it evoke loneliness and uncertainty. Echoing the sense of loneliness, longing, and sad wistfulness is Lee D. Thompson's "Night Divides the Day," which delves into teenage hopes and dreams and sometimes feels more like a dreamscape than a narrative. The story is a psychical experience, coloured by image and emotion, that captures the pursuit of and fascination with an unreachable, intangible person.

Michael Crummey's "The Night Watchman" and Joanne Soper Cook's "Sky" both explore the notion of an outside observer, voyeurs on the outside of other people's lives and problems who see glimpses or whole pits of darkness in those around them. In Crummey's story, the watchman's role as outsider does not detract from the realization that a door holding the possibility of his own happiness has closed. In "Sky," the protagonist is also affected by the events around him: darkness is present, and while there is room for reflection, there is no such thing as impartial observation. In Keith Collier's "Homecoming," Craig Francis Power's "Everything Was Lost in the Fire," and Sara Tilley's "Her Adolescence," there is a sense of hope that has curdled or been lost, a leaning towards bitterness and a loss of innocence, while the final story, Ramona Dearing's "An Apology" deals with judgement without actively judging itself. What becomes apparent in all these tales is the evidence of characters being or feeling backed into a corner, and left with the choice to face hardship or to turn away.

What the reader will find in this collection is a thoughtful and provocative selection of distinct Atlantic Canadian stories that leads them to question shades of darkness and desperation, as well as hope. There is an attraction to narratives that provide the option to bundle under the covers and hide during a raging storm, narratives that insist everything will be okay, forgiveness will ensue, order will be restored. The trouble with said narratives is that they are by and large fairy tales. There is merit in escapism, but there is also merit in confrontation and resilience, which is the focus of many dark tales. Certainly, it is a goal inherent in this anthology: the need to face danger and hardship in order to find some solace, catharsis, or redemption. Some of the characters face the darkness and some turn away. Others seem hopelessly lost, but most survive and endure the hard ol' spot. Ultimately the collection is a success that demands that the reader engage and respond with the material, a demand facilitated by the remarkable artwork by Darren Whalen that frames each story. As Kathleen Winter asserts, "there is a nod, in these line and shadow pieces, and in the stories, to Poe, to Oscar Wilde, to old craft that involves a quill, an inkpot, and a sinister edge" (xi). Each story forces the reader to stare into an abyss that stares back, and they form a unique and engaging collective.

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