

Trouble and Desire. Robin McGrath; Degrees of Nakedness: Stories. Lisa Moore.

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Degrees of Nakedness: Stories. Lisa Moore. Stratford, Ont.: The Mercury Press, 1995. 143 pp., \$14.50, paper, French flaps, ISBN 1-55128-023-X.

JOAN STRONG

TWO YEARS AGO, book columnist Phil Jenkins wrote in *The Ottawa Citizen* (17 July 1994) of the arrival of a group of Newfoundland writers who were to read from their collected stories, then recently published as *Extremities: Fiction from the Burning Rock*. He suggested it "... makes sense to predict, what with all those Irish genes floating around, that sooner or later Newfoundland is going to produce a Big Writer." Arguably several "Big" writing talents have already been produced; whether they've been marketed big (with exceptions such as the Canadian-seized E.J. Pratt) is another story. Canadians don't always hear much about the gems of small publishing, but the talents of writers and poets like Wayne Johnston, Bill Gough, Ken Harvey, Mary Dalton, Helen Porter and numerous others have found their way beyond Newfoundland both in mainstream reviews and in delighted word of mouth passages. Just the same, from my land-locked mainland world, I, like Jenkins, have to keep "my ear to the ground" for work I may not see on the shelves here. Great privilege, then, to hear of Lisa Moore — one of those "gang of 10" *Extremities* writers Jenkins told Canadians to watch for — and Robin McGrath producing their own collections of short stories.

In both books the writing is accomplished, drawing us through the strained and shifting experiences of late twentieth-century life in and out of Newfoundland. In "Wisdom Teeth," the third short story of Lisa Moore's sophisticated collection entitled *Degrees of Nakedness*, the protagonist, a young Newfoundlander job hunting in Toronto, visits the cabin of her house mate's parents and spends a painful evening enduring a tooth infection while viewing her hosts' slides:

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Kate's mother is sorting out old slides. She says, "If we don't know what they are, we're throwing them out."

Kate says, "You can't do that."

"Oh, yes I can."

Kate pins a white sheet over the fireplace. We each have a hot cup of tea. I have a fever now from the infection in my teeth. There's a picture of Kate's mother and father when they had just met. They're laughing into the camera.

A picture of Kate at ten with a kitten. A jungle in Malaysia. A falling cliff face in Venezuela.

"That's the earthquake," says Kate's father. A slide of a green field covered in mist.

"Oh, I love England," says Kate's mother, and she claps her hands.

A slide of a church window. Everyone leans closer.

"Throw it out," says Kate's mother. "We don't know what it is." But her father clicks on.

"You're not throwing anything out, Dave."

A slide of a grave stone, out of focus. (45)

In the deft and eclectic jumbling of images here and elsewhere in the book, Moore expresses with poignant and often abrasive clarity a fragmentation of experience evoked by relationships both forged and collapsed under new world orders. Geographies collide. Meanings dissolve. Delirium rages. We read each other in the remnant layers. Economic strain and its necessary locational rending, the uncertainty of social and family breakdown, the merely tentative relationships between lovers and the inherent dangers — often untreatable — resulting from infections of all kinds permeate the lives of Moore's characters. Their degrees of nakedness shock and warm us with their perilous and sustaining exhibitions. Nothing must be thrown out of these foreign experiences where we may or may not recognize ourselves.

In Robin McGrath's collection of short stories, *Trouble and Desire*, the ruptures between old and new ways are also unabashedly present. In "Mrs. Whitton's War" a father sleeps with his daughter to watch over her health after a severe asthma attack. They are guests in the home of a woman "around the bay" (22) where he was once a doctor and where he still follows convention to the letter for his hosts' pleasure. He draws the line at leaving his daughter to Mrs. Whitton's niceties and her insistence that his daughter sleep separately in her daughter Marion's old room:

In the house, Mrs. Whitton is distraught. My father speaks to her abruptly, without his usual gallantry. He does not want her to know he was frightened. I am not going to sleep in the kitchen after all, and Mrs. Whitton wants to put me in Marion's room. It has not been aired or heated so my father says I will sleep with him. Something happens to Mrs. Whitton then. She argues with my father. I am sitting, propped-up, on the daybed. My father is used to being obeyed. I am going to sleep with him. He lifts me, my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, and as we leave the

kitchen I look over his shoulder and see that Mrs. Whitton has pulled Marion's letters from the kitchen dresser and is holding them to her face. (26)

The demands of change in both past and present drive the story, from Marion who "is always planning and promising to come home for a visit [from Montreal], but ... [who] never does" (25) to Mrs. Whitton's husband, survivor of Beaumont Hamel, who has lost three of his fingers in the battle. Mrs. Whitton's war is the fight to order the events of her own household and it too demarks lost control of individual circumstance. Her daughter's letters, held to her face in instinctive defence, are no more protection to her than was the ginger ale poured by the protagonist's father over a handkerchief to keep the dust of a long drive around the bay out of the lungs of his daughter. Here the reader intuits — through McGrath's astute turnings — images of the woefully unprepared soldiers who often with only urine soaked rags tied around their faces braved the gas attacks of the First World War. With equal potential for fatality, Mrs. Whitton's rigidity in holding to inadequate custom threatens disaster. Marion's absence lingers to post a warning of the kinds of social loss brought about by the breakdown of communities. They are as vulnerable to the changing times and economics as the protagonist is to the dust of the road that takes her to her father's past. As in Moore's writing, death looms in many forms.

Despite the anguish evoked in the texts, both books reveal with subtlety and tenderness the importance of sustained and fleeting relationships in the shaping of our lives. Moore takes a hard look at the uncertainties of the love that nourishes us. In the less than romantic interlude between Cy and Donna in Moore's "Nipple of Paradise," in which they fumble through sex in their bathroom, the door locked against the pounding knocks of Cy's daughter, Hannah, Donna describes "her face wobbled with laughter because the position is so ridiculous." (10) No less precarious is her own sense of security with Cy, who has an affair. He tells her it is over, but when she asks how she can know that he won't leave her, he can only reply: "You don't know, Donna. I love you fiercely right now, that's the best I can offer." (20) The pathos here is matched by the protagonist's awareness of her predicament. Her situation makes her think of Hansel and Gretel and of "Buying precious time." Moreover, she sees love as "isolated flashes" that are "what we crave." (21) This is a world in which, in the story "Sea Urchin," a mother leaves "condoms in a pile on your bed next to your airline ticket" (25) and the sounds of sex stand against death like "an injection." (34) In "Degrees of Nakedness" a house in St. John's burns out of violence, hatred and fear. In "Purgatory's Wild Kingdom" a man in Toronto thinks about the woman and child he's left in Newfoundland and can't stay awake because failure makes him sleepy. In "Granular" explicit sex is followed by cold accusations that the woman is trying to get pregnant: "Jesus, Rob. ... What a thing to accuse me of." (102-3) Yet other currents course: in "Ingrid Catching Snowflakes on her Tongue" there is the salvage of a mother's voice, "almost in another language until the simplicity hits and you think you knew what it meant all along" (122); "Granular" embeds a gentleness that "comes from having sex with

the same person for so long" (108); and best of all the moments that, as in "Degrees of Nakedness," force healing beyond violence, "She starts to cry. I never hug people. I'm not a very physical person. But I hug her suddenly." (62)

McGrath too finds touchstones for survival. The "joyful anticipation welling up inside" (1) of her protagonist in "A Wishbone in the Sea" comes from renewed kinship with the island of her childhood despite her fleeting physical presence there. Sisters in "Threesies" reconstruct their pasts to share the life of a long-dead sibling, all the while old age lurking at the edges of the story. In "The Parish House" a divorced woman warned by a priest to forego a relationship with a married man gets out of the priest's car and slams the door, her resolve allowing her to keep on walking. Rage at racism in "The Other Mother" draws women together in weeping while in "Beset" a resistance against callousness and poverty leads to a song of joyful vibration. In "The Cockroach Room" a woman tries to fool herself that she is safe from emotional peril by virtue of her own coolness, but the protagonist in "The Bone Stands Alone" knows that she must take risks if she is not to find herself isolated, left standing bereft of others like a child taunted in a game of "Farmer in the Dell."

Both writers confront the uncertainties of our lives in these times, as we lose contact with what we think we know and must face those places we fear we do not recognize. Eloquently conveying these concerns, Moore's book concludes in "Haloes" that "each move chang[es] ... lives irrevocably. ... Our image splintered infinitely. Smashed but contained whole in each of the convex mirrors." (141) Her work, like McGrath's, travels near and foreign shores, transmuting such vulnerabilities to templates for survival.