

Lisa Moore. *Caught*.

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REVIEWS

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*On an island out in Trinity Bay / The ships are rollin' in. / They don't
carry haddock, they don't carry cod / Just hash and heroin. / It's for the
lunchbags upalong / Way up in Montreal. / The Mafia boys are waiting
there / When the hash boat comes to call. / With a pile of hash / A big
pile of hash / On the rocks of Ireland's Eye.*

— Dog Meat BBQ, “The Rocks of Ireland’s Eye”

Excluding the song cited above, there are few tributes to the drug smuggler in the literature and music of Newfoundland and Labrador. This deficiency Lisa Moore intends to remedy with *Caught*, as she elevates to mythical status the adventures of her protagonist, David Slaney, a convicted (and failed) marijuana smuggler who breaks out of prison on the first page of the narrative and begins a quest across continents to attempt one more time the daring deed that resulted in his imprisonment. Moore appears to follow all the rules of the quest narrative as they are laid out by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; *Caught* could be read alongside *The Odyssey* as a step-by-step guide through the Hero’s Journey. Moore’s novel has lost ships, oracles, metaphorical “deaths” of all sorts, gateways to hell, lotus eaters, sirens, lotus-eating sirens, several Cyclopes, and a boatload of hubris to match the boatload of pot on which balances our hero’s fate. The resultant narrative is fast and episodic and plays to Moore’s strengths of capturing humanity through the smaller moments and the larger tragedies.

David Slaney is Odysseus without the guile. He is daring; he is charming; he is intelligent; but he sees too late the traps laid out before him and one gets the sense early in the novel that this modern Odysseus may not have what it takes to dodge forever the fate the gods have in store for him. The title of the novel hangs over Slaney and his narrative like an unshakeable destiny — this is *Caught*, not *Catch Me If You Can*. But, as in all quests, it is the journey, not the

perceived goal, that is the novel's point, and readers are rewarded with the development of an amazing character throughout this adventure. One is reminded often here of Odysseus's outsmarting of the Cyclops — Odysseus tells the monster his name is "no one" so that after Odysseus has blinded him, when the Cyclops calls out for help his response to his brother's question of who is in the cave with him is "no one." Slaney often feels like "no one" in this novel and the readers are reminded that at the centre of this high-speed, epic escapade is a 25-year-old young man who has lost already four formative years in prison and is still trying to figure out who he is. As Slaney moves quickly from one encounter to another he gains and loses pieces of himself along the way and is at times more lost than Odysseus ever was. On discovering that the girlfriend he left behind four years ago has married another man, Slaney is overwhelmed to the point of doubting his corporeality:

My God, Slaney said. The force of it. Slaney felt faint is what he felt. He slammed a shoulder against the wall and waited for the darkness in the periphery of his vision to clear. He looked for a chair but there was no chair. He needed to go home, to reverse everything. His equilibrium was askew. A surge of pain in the wrong places, limbs he didn't have, his organs, his tendons. He didn't know what he was feeling, queasy and unequal. He was unequal to this news, unable to believe it. (101)

Later, stoned in a graveyard and lifting a plausible identity from a tombstone, the fugitive Slaney suffers another panicked slip outside himself:

Then Slaney saw a set of bright green footsteps in the dewy grey grass behind him and his heart leapt, thinking he had been followed. It was the dope; it took a second to recognize that the footprints were his own.

He was going to go by the name of another man; and he had caught up with himself, passed through himself. (138)

Slaney is hopelessly displaced. Though he is barred from returning to Newfoundland, he realizes that the island is not the "home" he left four years ago. So, too, the friends he reconnects with throughout the narrative are no longer the friends from "down home" he once had. For Slaney his only home is the job, his second attempt at smuggling marijuana into Canada. Slaney feels that only through completing this task can he gain some sense of permanence and resume and resettle his life. Slaney is very much a plaything of the

gods. Pinned to one destiny, he will be known either as the folk hero who triumphed or the folk hero who failed. Either way, he cannot escape this folktale. Slaney's unstoppable drive towards his destiny makes for compelling reading, so that many may finish this novel in a couple of sittings.

Caught showcases some of Moore's regularly deployed narrative techniques — in particular her tendency to interject the quotidian and mundane into important moments of plot exposition or character development. Hiding out in a hotel in New Brunswick, Slaney seems to give as much attention to a golfer on a course across the street from his room as he does contemplating what went wrong on his first caper. In a Montreal restaurant during his first post-breakout phone conversation with his partner and childhood friend, Brian Hearn, Slaney is as much preoccupied with a waitress serving pie and ice cream as he is with plotting the finer points of the upcoming endeavour. In another call with Hearn, Slaney is being chastised for earlier reckless behaviour but cannot help giving as much attention to a window dresser preparing mannequins in a store window. Encountering so much of this technique in rapid succession may compel a reader to exclaim "Here she goes again!" the next time Moore allows a waitress, a rooster, or a field of grass to demand as much attention as the more important aspects of the plot. However, these arbitrary elements are used brilliantly to heighten the plot and add humour to a story she has defined as "a gentle parody of [a] thriller." Slaney is so preoccupied with not being preoccupied that he misses the truth, often daydreaming the worst of a situation without realizing his daydream is actually playing out in front of him. In many hilarious moments, the young man is trying so hard to be cagey that he forgets to be cagey. Slaney is not a fool; but he is as much a comedic hero as he is a tragic one.

At other moments in *Caught* this third element of the here and now disappears and the reader becomes as focused as Slaney is on what really matters. The waitress disappears from Slaney's vision and consciousness once Hearn informs him that his girlfriend has married. Moore reveals what really drives this young man — those things that he wants so badly that they distract him from the very act of attaining them. Only Lisa Moore could take a plot as old as Greek tragedy, stir in elements of pulp and genre fiction, add a story as tired as a young Newfoundlander forced from his island and pining to return, and produce a tale as fresh and breathtaking as *Caught*. Readers beware: that tidal wave on the cover? It's coming for you.