

## Take Me Home — A Story from Newfoundland

*Bay Girl*. Betty Fitzpatrick Dorion. Coteau Books, 1998. 132 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-132-1.

It was a momentous time for Patsy's 74-year-old grandmother who, like many outporters in Newfoundland's coastal villages in the sixties, had to decide whether to capitulate to the government plan to resettle people inland. In fact, many of these outports were abandoned after the closing of essential services on which these people depended. Patsy's Mom was furious, and worried that her own mother would not survive a move: "Sleeveens is what they are, the whole lot of them. For God's sake, the outports are the backbone of Newfoundland. Fishing is our life" (5). Set against this serious social issue are the summer adventures of the eleven-year-old protagonist. Patsy, with her single Mom and Aunt Dora, travel up the coast to visit Gran and Uncle Wish in Shoal Harbour.

There are many firsts for Patsy, who learns and grows through her experiences and interactions with new friends and family in this unique place. Patsy, perceptive and curious, is enthralled with boats, proud to learn new skills, and equally enthused to impart her own. Dorion is adept at portraying her volatile moods and sensibilities. Her inability to keep a secret, and tendency for embellishment cause her much self-consciousness and inner turmoil: "Patsy put in a long guilt-ridden morning" (14). Her impulsive actions in a boat mishap rally nearly the whole community to rescue. She is a believable and likable girl, and her emotions mirror the excitement and anxiety of the adults around her. Uncertainty and fear of forced removal haunt their conversations: "All I know is fishing. I fished here all my life. I don't know what to do" (39). Patsy struggles with her own self-conflict and comes to feel the depth of friendship and the meaning of a place and home. A response from her Uncle Wish to the crisis, "It's not so much where to go ... as it is the leaving" (88), brings an awareness which enables her to empathize with her Gran. Other characters, such as her Mom, are realistic and well-rounded, and come alive with even brief descriptions: "There's nothing fluffy about Mom" (2).

Historical facts and the culture of the outporters are subtly incorporated throughout the story. Vivid coastal images attest to Dorion's memory of her own childhood in Newfoundland: the ghostly fog over the harbour, colourful hillside houses, fields of brilliant wild flowers, deep inlets and craggy bluffs. Distinct Newfoundland vocabulary, for which Dorion offers a small glossary, is scattered throughout the dialogue: maid, mug-up, stagehead, sleeveen, rory-eyed. Many special events — boat trips, a family picnic, berry-picking, the girls' outdoor explorations, the first house moving by barge, fishing and salting cod — all indicate a slower paced lifestyle, tied to the sea.

Dorion's straightforward narrative style is well suited to the point of view of eleven-year-old Patsy and the mood of the times. Occasionally, the children's conversations feel somewhat stiff and overly formal, and too many clichés abound — "stiff with terror," "threatening noises," "barked orders." However, some excellent nautical images and metaphors are very effective — "knees wobbled, jelly-fish weak" (22), "her voice brittle as pothole ice" (71), "brain of a squid" (79); and the adult voices feel genuine.

Although different in tone, atmosphere and setting, *Bay Girl* shares some

common themes with Dorion's first, prize-winning novel, *Melanie Bluelake's Dream*. Both feature a single-parent family, a girl's closeness to her grandmother, the importance of place and home, developing friendships and self-identity, and an appreciation of nature. *Bay Girl* serves a different purpose as well — young readers will learn of the traditions and values of a unique Newfoundland culture. They will find an authentic and highly readable story celebrating outdoor life, the joy of learning and the spirit of community. A personal friend, raised in such an outpost, and whose roots extend through generations of fishermen, voiced her approval appropriately: "a 'take-me-home' story, I loved it."

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### A Story for Bird Lovers

*Miracle at Willowcreek*. Annette LeBox. Illus. Kasia Charko. Second Story, 1998. 285 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-04-5.

This is the first novel of teacher and environmentalist Annette LeBox, who has already published two picture books for children. The novel encourages young people (ages eight to twelve) to learn about and protect our natural environment. It will appeal, however, to all "people who love trees and birds and wild flowers and the mossy scent of a marsh." These are the words of twelve-year-old Tess whose grandfather has just died and who has moved with her mother to his property — Willowcreek Farm — near a marsh in British Columbia. The area is home to many water birds, including the spectacular sandhill cranes. The author tells us that the crane is "a powerful spirit for girls" and this proves to be true for Tess.

Mourning the loss of her grandfather and trying to adjust to her new life, Tess is drawn to the marsh and the elusive cranes. Her interest soon leads her to Clara, an older woman, who lives nearby with her pet crane Tabi, and is known as the "bird woman." Tess and her new friends from school are soon bird watching with Clara and join in her plan to raise a baby crane to help preserve the species.

The story heats up when a group of developers makes a bid to build a golf course and hotel on the nesting site of the sandhill cranes. The hatching of Clara's crane egg and the mysterious death of Tabi are woven into the plot and lead to the book's rather miraculous ending. In fact, the ending is not quite plausible as everything falls into place a little too smoothly and all conflicts are resolved, including the ongoing tension between Tess and her mother. This doesn't really detract from the story, but perhaps makes it a little less realistic.

The author's own real-life involvement in preserving the marshlands around her home in British Columbia shines through her writing. The birds and their behaviour and habitat are eloquently described. The marshlands often become a metaphor for Tess's own feelings. "A marsh rain was like loneliness: too fine to see, but you could feel it."