

Coming of Age in Marten

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ANNE HART

A HUNDRED MILES or so east of Gander, and fifteen miles in from the Irving Station on the Trans-Canada, down a "a stretch of nothing but trees and a few ponds," lies the fishing village of Marten. It has a good harbour, wharves, fishing stages, sheds, a new fish plant, a population of 500 to 700, a school for 300, a church, a post office, a Legion, a fast food take-out, and an Ultramar Station. There's lots of cod-jigging and turr shooting for those that want it, and a nice stretch of woods in the back for hunting partridge, snaring rabbits, and driving skidoos. Long ago the Beothuck Indians summered here. Nowadays, in Newfoundland literature, Marten is where Kevin Major explores the teenage mind.

Though their paths never cross, the heroes of Major's three novels, *hold fast* (1978), *Far From Shore* (1980), and *Thirty-six Exposures* (1984), are one in their passionate conviction that most adults can't be trusted and don't have two clues anyway. "Shit!" broods Michael in *hold fast*, "It was just as well to be talking to the side of the wall. Just as well. I wasn't about to waste my breath any longer. I stamped off outa the kitchen, went into the bedroom and slammed the door." Scenes such as this are more in the mode of J. D. Salinger and Judy Blume than Anne of Green Gables, up to now Atlantic Canada's most exported teenager, and tend to cause unease to adults in authority. Dr. C. K. Brown, Director of the Division of Instruction of the Newfoundland Department of Education, has been quoted as saying (*Atlantic Insight* Nov. 1984: 26) the issue is one of "respectability. We wouldn't care to endorse the kind of language found in Kevin Major's novels." In a recent interview, Major himself recounts how "in one small library in Newfoundland, the principal wouldn't allow my books in the school library, because he thought the characters were too similar to teenagers in the community." Publishers, readers, and the more trendy of teachers and school librarians like Major's novels very much, however. He

has received at least six major Canadian and American literary prizes, he was chosen the 1985 winner of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council's Art Scammell Award for Creative Writing, and his books sell well throughout the world (*hold fast* has been translated into three languages). For many teenagers, whether the Newfoundland educational establishment likes it or not, growing up in Marten is where it's at.

hold fast is the story of Michael, a fourteen-year-old boy whose parents have been killed in a car accident. To compound his misfortune, he is transported away from Marten, his proper environment, to live with his timid Aunt Ellen and his overbearing Uncle Ted, a car dealer, in a paper mill city a few hundred miles away. Michael hates it, shopping malls and all, and he fights back against the high school bully, who calls him a bay wop, and against his uncle, who terrorizes his cringing family. All hell breaks loose when Michael is suspended from school for seriously injuring the bully, and to escape his uncle he runs away from home, taking with him his wimpy cousin Curtis who unexpectedly joins him. There follows an interesting truancy during which the boys steal—and later return—a car, camp out for several days in a washroom of a deserted national park, and make their way to Marten, where Michael is determined to stay. On this odyssey, the message is clear, he and Curtis have done a lot of male growing up. Curtis now has the courage to say to his father: "Right now, this minute, I can look at you and see how much I hate you"; Michael, remembering his dead parents, stops himself from crying. "I drove it out of my system last night and that might be the end of it."

Far From Shore is told in five voices, that of Christopher Slade, the fifteen-year-old main character; his mother Lucy; his father Gord; his sixteen-year-old sister Jennifer; and Rev. Wheaton, Marten's Anglican clergyman. While *hold fast* has elements of a *Boys' Own* ripping yarn (the vanquished bully; running away to adventure), and the fairy tale (the wicked uncle; children who take refuge in the woods), *Far From Shore* is all sociology, the portrait of a likeable family disintegrating under stresses of unemployment, marriage breakdown, alcohol, and drugs. The novel opens with a disastrous Christmas Eve: Jennifer, quick-witted and hard working, has resolved that the Slades will behave like a happy family. The tree is ready for trimming and the table is set with a white cloth and candles, but her plans are foiled by Chris's clowning, her mother's dispiritedness, and her father, who arrives home drunk and knocks over the tree. This chaos ushers in a year of crises for the Slades, particularly for the good-natured, vacillating Chris, who, unlike the capable Michael of *hold fast*, cannot master his own fate. His father, once a companionable parent, goes off to Alberta to look for work; his mother is offered a job at the food take-out and is seldom at home. Chris drifts away from his association with the church and Rev. Wheaton, whom he likes; he fails grade ten, and he takes

up with the fast crowd in Marten led by nineteen-year-old Stan Sheppara and his Monte Carlo, a 305 automatic ("Stan's got the engine tore right to shit. She can still lay a good strip but she's not going to last him all that much longer the way he laces her"). Following a drinking and hash expedition to a rock concert in St. John's, the gang vandalizes the school. Chris is implicated, there are angry scenes with his worried mother, and Rev. Wheaton comes to his aid by offering him a job as a counsellor at a church camp. Chris sets about his responsibilities with interest and purpose. At Rev. Wheaton's suggestion, he takes under his wing a frightened eleven-year-old foster child and becomes his gatekeeper to camp tomfoolery, ribald jokes, swimming, and canoeing ("You're too much Morrison, my son, too much. Does the Olympic team have your address or what?"), but disaster strikes when Chris takes Morrison canoeing at an unsupervised time. A wind comes up, the canoe overturns, and Chris barely manages, though with great courage, to save Morrison's life. The episode ends with Chris taken home in disgrace by Rev. Wheaton, the one adult who has consistently trusted him, to find his mother's employer hiding in a bedroom. Events then take a turn for the better. Chris is let off lightly on the vandalism charge, a girl he has liked for a long time agrees to go out with him, his father returns from Alberta to a reconciliation with his mother, Jennifer is accepted at university, and everyone has a party, a real scoff, with no one getting drunk.

The ambitious middle-class family in Kevin Major's third novel, *Thirty-six Exposures*, is in no danger of drifting far from shore, but it does have an irritating problem, the uncommunicative, uncooperative, seventeen-year-old Lorne, who won't go salmon fishing with his father or talk at meals unless spoken to directly. *Thirty-six Exposures* is a visual, poetic book. Lorne is a serious photographer and poet, and the book, which has thirty-six short chapters, uses a metaphor from photography for its title. The novel opens with one of Lorne's poems:

I am best photographed from a distance.
From there I could look average.
But as I come closer some becomes apparent.
You would probably detect my by the way
I walk
and if I were to speak, a slight might be
noticed.
It's most likely, though, that I'd walk right past you
and not say a word.

Unlike the straightforward Michael and the friendly Chris of the earlier novels, who tell their stories in the first person, Lorne is introspective and withdrawn, reading the poetry of Yevtushenko to the music of Pink Floyd

and The Who behind the locked door of his bedroom, and further distanced from the reader by the third-person narrative. At school he is a leader, working hard with four others on a major project, Lorne's creation, a history of Marten dramatized in poems, music and slides. One of the group, the irrepressible Trevor, is unfairly suspended from school for talking back to Mr. Ryan, an old-fashioned, authoritarian history teacher. Thus begins a major conflict of the novel, a battle of wills between Lorne and Mr. Ryan (it is not for nothing that the Library of Congress assigns SELF-ASSERTION-FICTION as one of the subject headings for this book). Lorne, to the dismay of his family, organizes a student strike in support of Trevor. Ryan takes his revenge by awarding the history project (greeted by wild applause in the school auditorium) a D. Another theme of the novel is sexual exploration. In *hold fast* and *Far From Shore* sex is an important topic of conversation and rumination (Michael says, in *hold fast*, "the fellows our age, the way we talks among ourselves, you'd think we was already all a bunch of sex maniacs"); in *Thirty-Six Exposures*, on graduation night, Lorne gets right down to it, not with Elaine, the nice quiet girl he's been going out with, but with Gwen, the sexually permissive outcast of the group. The next day Lorne and Trevor go on a tear in Trevor's car. To the music of a Bruce Springsteen song, the car hurtles over the wharf and into the harbour. Lorne survives but Trevor drowns, his face "a picture of horror." In hospital, Lorne is visited by his family and by the history teacher, Ryan, now inexplicably engaged to Lorne's widowed grandmother. Ryan tries to comfort him but Lorne shouts: "You weren't right. We did what was right! It was our way of doing it." The book ends with Lorne throwing his camera into the harbour and deciding to go to university.

There is no doubt that realism is one of Kevin Major's strong suits and that he is, despite what the Newfoundland Division of Instruction thinks of him, a good cartographer of the teenage mind. Though his books are almost entirely about boys, the fairly lengthy development of the character of Jennifer, Chris's sixteen-year-old sister in *Far From Shore*, also shows insight into the lives of girls. He gets the language right and he tells the truth, which makes him a good novelist, possibly an enduring one. But good as Major is, his novels as yet border on formula literature. A weakness in his present work is his portrayal of adults as seldom other than whiners or unenlightened tyrants, but this may right itself if Major continues to explore, and in greater depth, the catch in the net he has spread over Marten.

Though Major's books about teenagers are more than regional novels, what do they tell us about Newfoundland? Many of the trappings of North American teenage culture are here—underage drinking, drugs, rock music, driving cars fast—but weighed against the uncertainties of the future on the one hand ("I daresay I'll end up home at the squids and hope I get enough weeks to draw my unemployment," says Trevor in *Thirty-six Exposures*),

and that solid landscape of Marten with the good stretch of woods out back on the other, the glitzy stuff seems ephemeral, an initiation rite. "Half of what you do in school anyway is a pile of crap," complains Chris. "We've given you everything we could, and I've had to work damn hard to do it. Isn't it about time you showed a little appreciation?" complains Lorne's father. On the wall of the Marten school gymnasium on graduation day, crepe-paper flowers spell out the words "Don't Give Up on a Dream." It's an old story, boys growing up. Kevin Major tells it well.

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