

Gary Collins. The Place

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Gary Collins. *The Place*. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2019. ISBN (softcover) 978-1-771-17769-6

Gary Collins's most recent novel illustrates the pleasantly familiar intimacy, yet remarkable remoteness, of rural Newfoundland at the turn of the twentieth century. With a pen attuned to the lyrical dialect of the island and a keen eye on its rolling hills and rocky shores, Collins gives new life to the rich and complex history of pre-Confederation Newfoundland. *The Place*, with its deeply vulnerable characters and colourfully readable prose, transports its reader to a time and place illuminated by the dim, flickering glow of oil lamps.

The story weaves together the lives of Michael, Becky, and Jack, effortlessly maintaining narrative unity while tying together the past, present, and future of the three disparate characters. Through the lens of a lovestruck Catholic boy, a cruel fish culler, and a young woman suffering at the hand of a secret abuser, Collins simultaneously explores the ties that bind islanders together in times of great sorrow and the hardships faced by the victims of a period so problematically steeped in traditional values. The texture of this world is tangible, the narrative of each character seamlessly interlaced like a patchwork quilt, backed by an incredibly vivid portrait of the land on which their stories unfold. From the lush, weather-beaten cliffs and forest-lined paths of the then-country of Newfoundland to the lifeless, forlorn wasteland of the First World War, the land itself exists not only as a theatre for Collins's story, but as an extension of his characters. Becky, from whose perspective we gain some of the most beautiful descriptions of her small island fishing community, is the victim of a sexual assault that corrupts and contaminates her connection to the natural world. The land that once implied freedom and independence consequently became abruptly and deeply oppressive and isolating. Collins's careful depiction of Becky's lonely struggle is heartbreakingly poignant. His delicate but compelling portrayal of the devastating effects of sexual assault on mental health and motherhood is perhaps all the more powerful because of its disturbing pertinency in the present.

Tragedy, unfortunately, is not limited to one Place in this story, and it is a mark of the author's gift for storytelling that he is able to brilliantly connect two characters that never meet. Michael Kelly's Place is divided by centuries-old religious turmoil — a turmoil of which, Michael makes clear, no one really has a complete historical understanding. Indeed, Newfoundland's isolation from much of the "outside" world, a separation repeatedly highlighted by many throughout the course of the novel, serves to emphasize the harmful irrationality of religious segregation in the Place. Michael's unique historical consciousness sets him apart from the rest of the novel's cast of characters, and his ability to connect with the historicity of the land beneath his feet allows him to dissociate from the issues that afflict his world and make room for critical and open-minded thinking. Collins's simple metaphor of the fence between the two lovers, Michael and Ruth, a Catholic and a Protestant, is carried throughout the novel and brings the story to an effective and evocative conclusion. "Tis time," Becky's son, Jake, says gently, "to remove the stile between us" (222). The image of the stile, a simple, man-made barrier, subtly emphasizes the harmful effects of self-isolation that Collins so beautifully works into the narratives of each character in *The Place*.

Collins has a knack for creating characters so incredibly lifelike that it becomes difficult to separate them from the very real history in which his story takes place. Once again, he uses his storytelling prowess to make Newfoundland's complex past accessible to a wide audience. You may find yourself surprised as you turn the final page and look up to see a lamp lit by electricity rather than by a thin, quivering flame. Should you find yourself disoriented, I suggest putting the kettle on and calling over a neighbour — the hot cuppa and comforting conversation might ease your transition back into the present.

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