

Nicholas Ruddock. *How Loveta Got Her Baby*

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Early in his medical career, Ontario-born Nicholas Ruddock served for several years as the District Medical Officer for Fortune Bay.

"To say Newfoundland was full of memorable experiences would be an understatement," he says of this time; and now, years later, comes a lively feast, *How Loveta Got Her Baby*, a collection of short stories mostly set in rural Newfoundland and downtown St. John's in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Mixing and matching, they create a gallery of memorable characters from interlocking families and communities. As a result, Ruddock's readers are often treated to the ongoing delights of yet another story involving a particularly favoured character — Aaron Stookey, for example, watching television in Mistaken Point:

"What's all that?" Aaron said to his grandmother.

There were broken buildings in the background, rubbled, destroyed. There were stone columns bent at all angles. There were chips of rock and marble and dust and people running here and there and they all wore the same baggy white clothes. There was so much fine dust in the air, it was like they were rushing in and out of fog.

"It's Arabs," said his grandmother, "Arabs getting by. They're after running off with the old things. Antiques, treasures of all kinds."

"They stealing it?"

"Stealing? I don't know if I'd call it that, they're just getting by the best they can. Look at their teeth, mind you, those Arabs, Aaron, they got the whitest teeth I ever seen, every one."

Or, another example: Eunice Cluett in *Fog*:

It was a Monday, so Queenie and Henry and Eunice had to get up early. Eunice had the job — she did the laundry down at the nursing home. There was a lot of drooling there, and worse, so Eunice went in part-time. Turn-around time on the sheets, the towels, the washcloths was critical according to Mrs. Hann. She could lose her licence. So even though the visibility outside was down to zero, off they had to go. The rain was hanging out there like a shroud. Little Queenie materialized out of the mist like a mummer.

Or the entirely loved Otto Bond, hero of the Falcons' Soccer Team and survivor of the botulism disaster:

"Hi there," Otto Bond said to Bridie, the first time they met.

He'd walked into the store and just leaned on the counter with both elbows. It was just three weeks ago, early on in her shift, and there were no other customers there at all.

"Hi," Bridie said back to him.

He looked right at her. His eyes didn't shift away and he didn't jiggle from foot to foot.

"Pepperoni, if that's on the menu," he said.

Also, he smiled. There was nothing about that smile that made her feel uncertain. It was just there, his smile.

"Small, medium or large?" she said.

She'd had a dream that someday, someone like Otto Bond would walk into the shop, but it had never happened.

How Loveta Got Her Baby contains 15 sturdy short stories and, somewhat surprisingly, 10 much shorter pieces, most of them musings and random thoughts. Whether these add to the whole is up to the individual reader's taste.

Altogether this is a delightful book, full of joys, griefs, and a notable sense of place.

Anne Hart