

Megan Gail Coles. *Eating Habits of the Chronically Lonesome*

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REVIEWS

Megan Gail Coles. *Eating Habits of the Chronically Lonesome*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1771030526 (paperback).

Megan Gail Coles's debut book of short fiction, *Eating Habits of the Chronically Lonesome*, has garnered some significant attention since its publication in 2014. In addition to inciting rave reviews (a review in *The Overcast* was actually entitled "Rave Review"), the book won the 2014 BMO Winterset Award administered by the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. *Eating* is a slim volume of 16 stories, all christened as intriguingly as the collection's title, from the opening "There Are Tears In This Coconut" to "Some Words Taste Better Than Others" and "A Dog Is Not A Baby." The titles form an inviting menu *and* provide a satisfying aftertaste, when we look back at them with retrospective insight. Indeed, there's a desire to double back and think through not only the stories' titles but also their plots, as we begin to notice certain characters reappearing throughout.

Roughly half of the stories feature people who are on the verge of breakup or reeling from its aftermath. In "This Empty House Is Full of Furniture," Ruth is devastated that her ex has so efficiently moved on; she's "weeping to the point of asphyxiation, snot running down my face on the floor, scaring the cat." This description captures the vibe of many of the stories: things are extreme and raw, but also a tad humorous without mocking the characters' emotions. There's some dark humour, some tragicomedy, but also simple realism of the "shit-happens" variety. Some snippets are crude, as when Damon, who works with cadavers in the McGill med school fridge, imagines the students "all sucking each other off while surrounded by miscellaneous limbs." Other glimpses into these inner landscapes are more subtly poignant, such as the child narrator who observes, "The worst thing you can be at our house is *just like someone*."

Like when Dad is mad, I am just like my mother. And when Mom is mad, I am just like my father." While most of the cast are struggling with relationships that range from ambivalent to sour to abusive, the characters are all distinct and frankly interesting. Any blanket statement about them as a whole must be delivered with a caveat: they're young, but they're not *all* young. They're unhappy, but they're not *all* unhappy. They're at some stage of a breakup, but some of them are at the beginnings of relationships. There's despair, betrayal, and folly but also friendship, laughter, and hope.

We learn about these characters in part through their associations with food, which, as the book's title suggests, is a primary preoccupation. Food choices are comments on class and characterization: Garry eats tuna from the can while Shawn sips white wine and grills salmon; Pam consumes bite-sized brownies, tater poutine, peanuts, and Diet Orange Crush while another woman decorates gourmet cupcakes for hours without taking a single bite. Food is also grounds for negotiation, as when the defeated girlfriend wonders "what food would make Simon happy" or when Matthieu berates Modelaine for making omelets unlike his mother's. The final story belongs to Hazel, the elderly matriarch waiting at home for family to call. Her culinary associations suggest time gone by. She tries to remember that she's supposed to say "pasta" instead of macaroni and decides that her body is "too old to grow accustomed to spinach." The final words of her story are a fitting and affecting finale: "Yeah, Margie love. Yeah, what ya got on for supper?"

In terms of setting, each story is geographically situated, with sites of action haunted by places of origin. This is the case for Tanya from Russia, trying to grapple with Montreal, as is Modelaine from Haiti. For many of the characters, Newfoundland is the place left behind as they sojourn elsewhere: "Mom warns that I will be overcome with remorse the moment the plane takes off, but I'm not," says Ellen, as she departs from St. John's (31). Newfoundland inhabits certain voices more prominently, such as the narrator in "Flush Three Times To Show You Care," and inflects many more. Where we have the impression that the province is being portrayed rather unflatteringly ("Janine wonders who would ever want to live in such a place"), we also have the impression that these jabs are affectionate. Pop culture references throughout the book also locate the action in time and space: this is mostly late twentieth-century and contemporary North America, a land of Facebook, Value Village, Pert Plus, Berri Metro, iced cappuccino, Tim Hortons, and 90210. Canadian content is sprinkled throughout: Senate reform is mentioned, and there is a memorable, amusing description of Stratford, Ontario, home of "pastoral Canadiana."

Coles has cited Lisa Moore as an important influence, which comes through in some of the vivid, careful imagery and the focus on what's going on in people's heads, not to mention the presence of Newfoundland. Where the stories feel more raucous than Moore, their energy is akin to that of Zoe Whittall, or — to cite an east coast example — Christy Ann Conlin's *Heave*. These comparisons are entirely complimentary; this is a collection full of charm and skill. Whole personal histories are suggested in a few sparse pages, which is, of course, the particular magic of short fiction as a genre. And in response to these personal histories, readers are led through a range of rewarding reactions: curiosity, amusement, discomfort, and ultimately, empathy.

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Elisabeth de Mariaffi. *The Devil You Know*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015. ISBN: 978-1476779089

The truth is that most crime novels are not really about crime. Crime is a violation both physical and existential. Whether it is assault, a sexual offence, or theft, the victims are changed. Their sense of identity and of the natural order is bent, and often permanently broken. They can never quite feel safe again when their spaces or bodies or both have been trespassed. Murder, of course, creates multiple victims. People who once loved those now dead, people who knew them in passing, even those who watch a report on the evening news may find themselves contemplating the dark implications of the irrationality of why some of us live while others die too young and in agony. Thrillers and mystery novels, in general, are antidotes against the fear, reshaping what should be profoundly disturbing into entertainment. The victim becomes merely the initiator of a process leading to a reasonable resolution. Murder will out, malefactors are punished, and isn't that fun? It is all a game, tricking us into mistaking a very real and vicious bear for a bush.

The Devil You Know, however, is more than a simple mystery or thriller. A superior page-turner, it also has a great deal to say about crime in the world as opposed to crime in the world of entertainment. The author, Elisabeth De