

I do. Who wouldn't?

Three for a Wedding

By Mary C. Sheppard

reviewed by Lisa Moore

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It's the late 1980s and there's going to be a wedding in fictional town of Cook's Cove, Newfoundland. The late '80s, remember? Princess Di and Charles are beginning to have troubles, Wayne Gretzky is getting married, *Moonstruck* is playing in the cinemas, Brian Peckford is premier and the fashion world is full to the gills with ruffles, puffy sleeves and too much purple.

Jenny Derby has called home from St. John's to say she's getting married to one of the Cove's handsome layabouts. Part of the colossal job of getting the couple hitched, without a hitch, will be to stop wagging tongues. There's great haste for the wedding because the couple are so very much in love. Jenny's mother reminds her daughters to not go "inviting talk in the front door." Everything has to look as if it's been planned well in advance.

And the heft of those wedding plans fall on the shoulders of 16-year-old Violet Blue Derby, the heroine of our tale, and her mother Melinda Derby, a widow, the town matriarch and head of the Ladies' Aid Auxiliary. There's competition between Melinda Derby and the mother of the groom as to who's the real queen of the Cove, but Eunice Childs has two things against her: "First of all, she wasn't a Derby and Derby women had ruled the roost in the Cove for more than a hundred years; and second of all, she was not from here." The reader might assume that Eunice was from Outer Mongolia, but she's actually from Cox's Cove, not far by boat, but too far to be taken seriously in Cook's Cove.

Besides, the Derbys are rumoured have royal blood in their veins. In the 1700s, an English princess fell in love with a sea captain and

ran off to Newfoundland with the family silver. Violet Blue comes by her feisty independence, fast opinions and feminist pluck honestly. There's also a little DNA from another red-haired Atlantic ancestor. Not quite as romantic as Anne of Green Gables, nor as given to poetic musings, Violet Blue is every bit as stubborn and sparkling.

Three for a Wedding is the third in series of novels by Mary C. Sheppard, who was born in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, and worked as a journalist for two decades in Toronto before writing young adult novels.

Cook's Cove shows a Newfoundland full of family ties, community bonds and prodigious pride of place. There's a particular brand of innocence that comes from looking back on an idyllic childhood spent outdoors in the sunshine, swimming in the cold ocean. A tight-knittedness born of the hard work of fishing and living in a fishbowl. Everybody knows everybody's business and fresh scandal is as delicious as anything they serve at the turkey-tea.

The novel unfolds over one super-eventful summer and brims with characters, brazen and subtle, often vivid, and it's a story that kindles with seductive charm. Jane Austen is evoked: a small, rural community, spice of scandal, dastardly deeds, villains quickly dispatched, misunderstandings, familial love. There are stuck up and wealthy romantic types who graciously woo the proud but ever so slightly down-at-heel heroine, despite her awkward efforts to spurn such exciting interest. And topping off everything: a big, splashy wedding.

And of course there are mysterious strangers. In the midst of final exams, wedding preparations and the upcoming annual Garden Party and Time, Grace-Mae Hodge, Violet's extremely rich cousin, has arrived from Boston. She's brought lots of luggage and boatloads of attitude. Sophisticated and brooding, Grace-Mae wants to know what there is to do in the tiny town.

She soon learns that teenagers swim and row dories, eat fish and chips, cook and clean and look for romance, sing and go to dances. They have picnics and sail. If there's a kitchen party someone will get up to play the fiddle, guests wander in and out of each other's

houses at all hours of the day.

Everything is done by the women in Cook's Cove: They cook, they serve, they primp, hook rugs, knit baby clothes, wrangle politicians, demand new bridges, doctor the sick and tell stories.

Sheppard delivers this seemingly quaint but convincing world with a kind of glee that makes it authentic.

But our Grace-Mae is haunted by a past that will soon show up, lugging a camera and offering a reward to anyone who can give him information about the platinum-haired waif new in town.

Grace-Mae is sullen and lazy, ruined by servants, unable to make a cup of tea, but brawny and full of grit. When it comes to matters of style, she's got an artist's eye and takes charge. Many a multi-ruffled blunder is narrowly averted, and under Grace-Mae's appraising eye and sharp scissors, the tomboy-duckling Violet Blue is transformed into a swan.

Some of the plot turns feel bunched up and melodramatic toward the end. These tend to resolve too easily and the dialogue – natural and witty throughout most of the novel – begins to feel forced into the service of the plot. There's plenty of romance and each bridesmaid ends up with a starry-eyed love interest for the wedding night. There's no underage drinking and scant physical contact, except a few kisses, and perhaps Sheppard is a little coy here.

But the marrow of this book is in the relations between women and how they provide and care of the ones they love and how they throw a party. They throw a party with style.

The true story here, subtle and touching, is about the friendship between the two girl cousins. Here is a friendship full of fiery sparks and cool civility, and like the fudge Violet Blue makes for the Garden Party, the friendship comes to a slow tantalizing boil, and turns out beautifully sweet.

Lisa Moore's new novel, February, will be published in June.

An excerpt from *Three for a Wedding*: I had been in the middle

of a big fight with my mother yesterday when the phone rang: Mom jumped to answer it. I was making my point yet again that once I graduated high school next year I had no intention of going to Toronto, or even St. John's, to start a science degree. It wasn't like we hadn't been over the same ground a few too many times already.

... What I never said, and didn't know how to say, was that my dad, who had died six years ago, had worked his whole life to keep us here and I couldn't bear how she was bent on ripping out my roots. Just because she missed out on leaving the Cove when she was my age didn't mean I had to fulfill her dream. I had my own dreams.

"Hello," my mom said into the mouthpiece, and then she looked at me with daggers in her eyes, put her finger on her lips and held her hand up, palm flat out, in a "stop right there" gesture. Once I saw from the way the blood drained from her face that the call was serious, I took a deep breath, flounced onto the couch and pinned my ears back to hear every word.