

## Forward into our past

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**Seven for a Secret,**  
**by Mary C. Sheppard,**  
**Groundwood, 189 pages, \$19.95,**  
**ages 14 and up**

Lordy, lordy -- to quote its own vernacular -- this is some book! A first book by a Newfoundlander born and bred, *Seven for a Secret* is an unputdownable novel about the lives of three girls in the early 1960s in the fictional coastal village of Cook's Cove. The Cove is a boat trip away from Corner Brook and inaccessible by road, although a road is being built.

As the novel begins, 15-year-old Melinda is meeting her cousin Kate at the ferry dock. Every June for eight years, Kate has been coming from Corner Brook, "the city," to spend the summer with her father's large extended family in Cook's Cove, and especially with her first cousins Rebecca and Melinda, all born in the same year.

Eight years ago, Kate was a sickly child. Now she's a bookish and rather plain introvert with no interest whatsoever in boys, but she still needs needs a summer of fresh sea air. Rebecca is dark and attractive, and already displays a remarkable talent as an artist. Melinda, the "I" in this novel, is a voluptuous, red-headed extrovert, dying to marry "my Matt," a young fisherman. Her mother, though, has other ideas about her academically accomplished daughter.

This trio of cousins fully expects to spend this summer as it has all others: in the girlish pursuits of picnicking and gossiping, doing chores and enjoying each others' company. Almost immediately, this summer is different. A stranger comes into the Cove's harbour on his yacht and observes Rebecca painting portraits at a garden party and sale to benefit the church. He offers to pay for her to attend art school that summer in Boston, an offer vigorously rejected by Rebecca's mother, Aunt Grace. The girls can't quite believe that Aunt Grace won't come around, so under Melinda's leadership, they decide that they will get Rebecca's passport in order so that she will be ready to go at a moment's notice.

The retrieval of Rebecca's birth certificate from its hiding place reveals a dark secret that Aunt Grace has husbanded. This secret, in turn, reveals others,

transforming the girls' projected idyll of a summer into something quite other. The summer when Melinda, Rebecca and Kate were 15 marks the beginning of a circumscribed womanhood, a time of choices made and not made, of patterns of living established generations ago in Cook's Cove, playing themselves out yet again in the lives of these young women.

If there are dark themes and undertones to this brilliant debut novel, there is also a liveliness -- an astonishing amount of "life" -- that radiates from its pages. Its language, its characters, its story are indelible.