

# The odd girl out

*When she was young, Mary Sheppard read voraciously and avoided boys, she tells SUSAN PERREN. But that doesn't mean her characters are her.*

By SUSAN PERREN

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There are three main characters in Mary C. Sheppard's first book, the novel *Seven for a Secret*. Or rather, there's one main character and two almost-main characters who orbit around her. All three are 15, going on 16, and they are cousins, offspring of two sisters and a brother who, in turn, are descended from a long line of seafaring folk and occasional entrepreneurs from Cook's Cove, Newfoundland.

The orbiters are Rebecca and Kate, daughters respectively of the doyenne of Cook's Cove, Aunt Grace, and of Uncle Herb, who moved away to Corner Brook, married a Catholic and produced an almost endless number of children. Rebecca, only child of Aunt Grace and Wilf, is attractive and accomplished -- a good student and promising artist.

Kate, who arrives every summer because the salt air is deemed to be good for her, is a bit of a brown mouse. She hides her best feature, her eyes, behind the kind of winged glasses that were worn in the early Sixties, her bangs are too long, and her shapeless dresses do little to flatter a still-scrawny body. She's a bookish girl, well-acquainted with Jane Austen, with a declared aversion to boys: She's seen the trouble that an interest in boys has led to in the lives of her older sisters.

The sun around whom these two satellites orbit is Melinda, narrator of the novel, a redhead, outspoken, audacious, voluptuous. Given a character so rounded and nuanced, so supremely alive, a reader could be forgiven for succumbing to the temptation to imagine, even assume, that this novel by a Newfoundlander about Newfoundland is autobiographical.

When I met Mary Sheppard at Down East, a shop in downtown Toronto that sells and promotes all manner of artifacts from Canada's East Coast, I succumbed to temptation. As we shook hands (firmly), I examined her face and, noting her strawberry blonde hair, asked Sheppard point-blank whether she had been a redhead when she was younger, say 30 or so years ago when she, and Melinda, were 15. "No," was her firm and unblinking answer. My knuckles figuratively rapped, we settled down to talk.

The novel, its plot and characters, threaded itself through our conversation. It is clear that the summer that Melinda, Rebecca and Kate were 15, going on 16, was the turning point in all their lives. Sheppard's strongly held view is that by 15, girls are women, "capable of making up their own minds."

By the novel's end these girls/women have made their choices. Rebecca, bending to her mother's will, has forsaken her dreams of becoming an artist and is prepared to spend the rest of her life in Cook's Cove. Melinda "accidentally" becomes pregnant by "my Matt," the young fisherman she would have married in due course, after becoming a nurse. She too, in all probability, will remain in Cook's Cove for the rest of her life, carrying on a generations-old tradition of untrained nursing work in the Cove.

While it might appear that Rebecca and Melinda have made up their own minds, something else is at play here, something to do with preserving the status quo. The role of women in Cook's Cove is narrowly defined. Everyone gets married. Everyone. Rebecca and Melinda make an important choice in choosing to stay close to home. In so doing they also preserve family secrets "that can't be told." The surface, at least, of life in Cook's Cove remains unruffled; shameful, sorrowful things remain unrevealed.

And Kate? What happens to Kate? We don't really know what happens to Kate the visiting cousin, except that she will go home to Corner Brook and continue her schooling. She will no doubt be successful academically, but will she maintain her necessary aversion to boys and evade her mother's efforts to marry her off quickly?

"*Seven for a Secret* is fiction, all fiction," Mary tells me, and I believe her. But if it weren't fiction, and if Cook's Cove were real, its name would be Lark Harbour, up the coast from Corner Brook and accessible only by ferry before the road was built in the Sixties. Lark Harbour is where Sheppard spent all her summers from the age of eight with her cousins.

Sixth of nine children born to a British war bride and a Bowater paper-mill worker, originally from Lark Harbour, Mary grew up in Corner Brook. She was a sickly child, sent to Lark Harbour every summer to reap the benefit of its fresh salt air. Twenty years later, she discovered that she had a milk allergy, which explained why she always felt so well in Lark Harbour, where there were fish and turnips and berries and more fish, but not a bit of dairy.

Mary describes herself as the odd one out in her family. She was a voracious reader -- of Jane Austen, among others. She avoided the boys at home because, as she says, "I did not want to date boys. I'd seen what could happen, saw the trouble it led to in my own sisters' lives."

Hers, she says, "was a family that couldn't, either intellectually or financially, support my hopes for a university education," but it was clear early on what she had made up her mind to have. And have it she did, by dint of hard labour and with some help from her mother, who "agitated" for girls to be allowed to complete the equivalent of first-year university at the boy's high school.

Among the five courses offered that year to the girls was theology, "the only prerequisite beyond a high-school diploma for a teaching certificate," she wryly explains. Armed with that certificate, Mary and three other girls went down to the isolated community of Conne River, on the south coast of Newfoundland, to teach. Mary, 18, taught Grade 3 and sent her paycheques home to her mother, who, in turn, sent her a \$20 allowance every two weeks.

Eventually, she had enough money saved to get herself to St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, where she majored in political science. After three years and pondering her next move, she approached one of her professors to ask for a letter of recommendation for law school. "He looked out the window and flatly declined," she says. "But, he said, 'I will give you one for Columbia University's School of Journalism: That's where you belong.' "

And so she went -- to New York, on full scholarship for a master's degree in broadcast journalism. From there it was Maclean's magazine as an editorial assistant and then the CBC, first as an editorial assistant, then as a reporter in the field (Moncton and P.E.I.), and ultimately back to Toronto as manager of CBC Educational Resources, where she left, she says and others confirm, a legacy of putting women in positions of power. Today she teaches broadcast journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto. Although I'm tempted to, I don't ask if this is what happened to Kate.

If this all sounds smooth as silk, it wasn't. The "worst days" of Sheppard's life came when her job at the CBC was cut. A hiatus presented itself in 1996 when her husband, Paul Hickey, a partner at the accounting firm KPMG in Toronto, was offered a job in Amsterdam in KPMG's international tax department.

After considerable soul-searching, she decided to join her husband in Amsterdam. They and their two daughters had two wonderful years there. She went along for the ride, so to speak, with nothing to do. So it was there, as she says, that she "finally sat down" to write a book. About what? Well, there were "lots of things I'd nursed over the years and come to terms with." Family stuff, it would seem. And the notion of "how things are set . . . especially for women. It's so hard to break out of these patterns, especially in small communities."

The book was five years in the making, but if you added up the hours, just three months in the writing. Sitting at her writing desk, being Melinda, the narrator of *Seven for a Secret*, was extraordinarily gruelling: "I would be totally wiped after an hour . . . remembering what Melinda would smell, see, feel."

For a first-time writer, she has had an enormous success just in getting an unsolicited manuscript published. Positive responses from publishers to the first chapters encouraged her to persevere.

What next? Answering my own question, I suggest that she might bask for a moment in the glow of this wonderful book. Sheppard, though, thinks that she might do something with the Conne River teaching experience. There's a gleam in her eye. I hope we won't have to wait five years for it, but I don't say that either.