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One for Sorrow: Tales from Cook's Cove.

Mary C. Sheppard. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada, 2008. 244 pp., pbk., \$14.00. ISBN 978-0-14-305413-9.

Grades 6-9 / Ages 11-14. Review by Mary Thomas. * /4**

excerpt:

One thing I learned early is that it's not so easy to come back to life. My mother continued to keep to her bed most days, recovering from the heart attack that had almost killed her two hours after I was born. She spent some of her time lounging on the chesterfield, drinking tea and eating chocolates and biscuits, getting fatter and fatter and bossing us around. I'd heard the gossip: "Her heart is just fine, but Agnes never got over having a baby eighteen years after being told she could never have another child." The neighbours seldom noticed that I was in the room, listening to every word. I had come as an extra enormous shock to my mother, because with her being a rather large, sickly woman at the time, she didn't know she was pregnant until the doctor admitted her to the maternity ward at the hospital. Mother made sure we knew her life was wretched. Definitely not the suffering-in-silence type. Deep in my heart I believed she had given up wanting to get better. If she did, she would lose her companion and maid, my sister, who handled Mother like she was a fragile egg. Before she became a doormat, my sister had a real life.

The title of Mary Sheppard's second tale from Cook's Cove might more accurately have been "One is one and all alone" for Issy is surely one of the most lonely and isolated persons I have met, in life or literature. The sorrow part of the title is least apt. In spite of Issy's fairly grim situation, this is basically a hopeful book, one where the emotional direction is up rather than down. (Come to think of it, it is perhaps this quality, found more often in young-adult as opposed to adult novels, that makes me prefer the former to the latter!)

Be that as it may, Issy's life in grade nine in this small Newfoundland outport town in the 1970s is not a lot of fun. Her mother is an invalid-turned-bedridden tyrant, her sister an embittered school principal pulled home from a promising academic career by the birth of a much younger sister--Issy--needing looking after, and her father, beloved and apparently rather nice, rarely at home. As well, she has been unable to learn to read, a great disappointment to her intellectually gifted sister both for its own sake and because she wants Issy to be able to take over the care of their mother, to read medicine labels, etc. The final nail in this unhappy coffin is the death of Great-Aunt Lady, the only adult in Issy's life who to this point has seemed to love and value her.

It's a downer, all right. And you wouldn't think that falling through the ice would improve matters, but, in fact, it is the first crack in Issy's defensive wall that she has erected to keep her contemporaries from getting close to her. "They knew [that I was stupid] and they pitied me, and I couldn't stand pity. so it was me who turned away from them."

Young Wish--the nicest possible diminutive of Aloysius!--who pulled both Issy and her sister Louise from the icy waters of the bay, had already rescued Issy once before when, as a terrified eight-year-old, she was attacked by a vicious dog. Obviously their paths were destined to be intertwined, and he is determined that they be so. Louise is equally determined that Issy learn to read, and finally, in her frustration, Louise writes the words she is teaching in BIG letters--to be shattered to discover that Issy's problem is her sight, not her intelligence!

Issy, Louise, even her mother, are all characters to enrich one's life. Not all aspects of small towns are great--does anyone really want to have no secrets?--but they have a coherence to them that keeps their inhabitants anchored to reality. T.S.Eliot said that "human kind cannot bear very much reality," but we do like looking at, and reading about, other people's methods of coping with it. *One for Sorrow* is a good place to start.

Recommended.

Mary Thomas was born and raised in a small town but has lived and worked in Winnipeg, MB, for nearly 40 years.