

**Seven for a Secret,  
by Mary C. Sheppard,  
Groundwood, 189 pages**

**Reviewed by Philippa Sheppard (no relation to the author)  
For *Quill and Quire***

Toronto journalist Mary C. Sheppard's first novel is a searching portrayal of life in a Newfoundland outport, Cook's Cove, in 1960. The novel's first-person narrator, Melinda, is a fun-loving 15-year-old with a reputation for putting her cousins, the dutiful Rebecca and the intellectual Kate, up to mischief. When a stranger arrives to offer Rebecca patronage at an art school in Boston, the cousins' summer of church socials and baby showers becomes dominated by their struggle with Rebecca's mother, who's vehemently against the plan. Only Melinda uncovers the dark secret that motivates her aunt.

The novel is extraordinary in its unpredictability. It is not the protagonist but Rebecca who encounters radical changes in her sense of self, and Kate who unexpectedly has the new experience of falling in love. Melinda follows the dreary trajectory mapped out by many women before her in Cook's Cove – get knocked up, drop out of high school, get married. What is surprising and honest in Sheppard's depiction of Melinda is that she is only a bit wistful about the life she could have had as one of the province's brightest students. Mostly, she is joyful at the prospect of playing homemaker to her fisherman. Sheppard conveys through Melinda the unmatched loyalty that so many Newfoundland communities inspire in their inhabitants and the fledgling nature of a teenage girl's ambitions in 1960.

Sheppard never romanticizes. Some of the men drink too much and get violent, and some of the women are vicious in their appraisal of other women. Yet, as with any small community, the flip side of nosiness is support and a sense of belonging. Sheppard perfectly captures the dialect, and records, with vivid truth, details that render life in the outports unique and yet universal.