

Crow Lake by Mary Lawson

Personal Information: Family: Born 1946, in Blackwell, Ontario, Canada; married; husband's name, Richard; children: sons. Education: McGill University, B.S., 1968. Addresses: Home: Surrey, England. Agent: c/o Author Mail, A.A. Knopf, One Toronto Street, Unit 300, Toronto, Ontario M5C 2V6, Canada.

Career: Worked in a steel research lab, London, England.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

- (Editor) *While You Wait: A Guide to the Opportunities for Students, between Leaving School and Continuing Further Education, Careers Research and Advisory Centre (Cambridge, England), 1974.*
- *Crow Lake, A.A. Knopf Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2002.*

Sidelights

Mary Lawson's debut novel, *Crow Lake*, began as a short story she wrote in the 1980s. *Crow Lake* is set in a small, quiet town of the same name in Northern Ontario, where Lawson spent much of her childhood. Kate Morrison's parents were killed when a logging truck hit their car. Desperate to keep their family together, her older brother Luke, then just nineteen, gave up his college education to raise his three younger siblings, which included seventeen-year-old Matt, Kate, then seven, and baby Bo. Luke wants Matt, the smartest one, to be the first of the siblings to go to college, but he isn't interested. Kate ends up being the first and earns a degree in zoology. Years later Kate works as a professor far away from *Crow Lake*. She feels guilty about her success and the opportunities her brothers missed out on because of her. Kate hasn't been back to see her siblings in years and feels distant from them all. When invited back for her nephew's birthday party Kate starts to think back to her childhood and realizes there is something she must confront back at *Crow Lake*. Book Browser contributor Maureen O'Connor noted, "Storytelling involves so much: characters, setting, plot, language, structure. And Mary Lawson has excelled in all of these." January Magazine contributor Margaret Gunning concluded, "Let us rejoice in the discovery of this subtle, graceful, late-blooming talent."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, January 1, 2002, Danise Hoover, review of *Crow Lake*, p. 811.
- Chatelaine, April, 2002, "Ripple Effect," p. 28.
- Kirkus Reviews, December 15, 2001, review of *Crow Lake*, p. 1706.
- Library Journal, February 15, 2002, Beth E. Anderson, review of *Crow Lake*, p. 178.
- Maclean's, July 1, 2002, Brian Bethune, "Unforgotten Country: New Canadian Fiction Still Draws from a Past Quickly Fading into Myth," p. 84.

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- New York Times Book Review, March 31, 2002, Janet Burroway, "The Girl She Left Behind."
- Spectator, April 6, 2002, Nicolette Jones, "A Child's Book of True Crime," p. 35.

ONLINE

- Book Browser, <http://www.bookbrowser.com/> (September 5, 2002), Maureen O'Connor, review of Crow Lake.
- Book Page, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (September 5, 2002), Amy Scribner, "Canadian Writer Spins a Lyrical Debut."
- Book Reporter, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (September 5, 2002), Kathy Weissman, review of Crow Lake.
- January Magazine, <http://www.januarymagazine.com/> (September 5, 2002), Margaret Gunning, "In Praise of Late Bloomers."
- Random House of Canada Web site, <http://www.randomhouse.ca/> (September 5, 2002).*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors

Interview

Q. What inspired you to write this novel?

ML: The honest answer is, I don't know. The novel came from a short story, and the short story came from a single sentence, which came into my mind one morning without explanation and out of nowhere. It was, 'My great grandmother fixed a book-rest to her spinning wheel so that she could read while she was spinning.'

This was true – fact not fiction – though I still have no idea why I suddenly thought of it. My mother had mentioned our great grandmother often when we were children, but that was a long time ago and I hadn't given her a thought for years.

There was quite a gap between the short story and the novel, and during that time both of my parents died and my children flew the nest. I spent even more time than usual, then, thinking about issues of family, home and childhood, and I have no doubt that that had an influence on the novel.

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Q. Do you see Kate's character as being autobiographical to a certain extent and if so, in what ways?

ML: If you'd asked if the story was autobiographical – no. Virtually nothing that takes place in the novel happened in my life. But you asked about Kate's character, which is harder to answer.

She is much more serious than I, but circumstances have made her so. She has been damaged by loss, and the damage has made her rather self-righteous and judgmental – I hope I am not quite as hard on other people as she is. Having said that, I do share some of her prejudices; the work ethic is strong in both of us; I expect a lot of myself and of those around me; I am not by nature tolerant, easygoing or laissez-faire. But fear of further loss has caused Kate to limit her world. Academic study is safe, it cannot betray her; love, on the other hand, would make her vulnerable again. So she keeps the barriers up, to protect herself. Life has been much kinder to me than it was to her.

As for other similarities; I have two older brothers, whom I adored as a child (still do), so I have shared with Kate the experience of hero worship. I also have a younger sister, whose infant self was the model for Bo. (She is the only character based on a 'real' person, apart from Great Grandmother.) Family is tremendously important to Kate, and it is to me.

Q. 'Setting too much store by education can be a subtly dangerous thing'. Do you agree and if so, why?

ML: I think setting too much store by any ideal, however admirable, can be dangerous. It can take over; it can damage your sense of proportion and blind you to other things.

Q. Why did you choose Northern Ontario as the background for this novel? How much did you draw on your own childhood experiences?

ML: I grew up in Southern Ontario, but my family spent a lot of time in the North, and it is the North I think of when I think of home.

The community I grew up in was larger than Crow Lake, less isolated, much less homogeneous, and less remote, but it was isolated enough that people depended on each other, and took care of each other. There is a downside to small communities of course – they are hell on earth for those who don't fit in – but I remember it with affection, and Crow Lake is in some respects a tribute to it.

Small incidents in the book did take place in reality – people regularly go through the ice out on the lake, for instance, and the winter storms I've described are drawn from life. The ponds are drawn from life too – as in the novel, they were back beyond the railroad tracks, and were full of all manner of marvelous wriggling creatures.

Q. The novel moves in its very early stages into tragedy. Do you think it would be fair to say that the rest of the novel deals with overcoming that?

ML: A number of people who have read Crow Lake feel that its main theme is bereavement and coming

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to terms with loss, but in fact, that was not uppermost in my mind when I wrote it. For me, the heart of the novel is the relationship between Matt and Kate, and the greatest and most tragic loss in the story is the loss of that relationship. The tragedy which occurs at the beginning of the book would have had an enormous effect on all the Morrison children, and the story of their attempt to remain together as a family is the backbone of the novel, but for me, the central struggle is Kate's attempt to understand what went wrong between her and Matt – a struggle which requires her to re-evaluate the goals and principles by which she has lived her life.

Q. For you, what was the importance of the Ponds? Clearly the symbol of a bond of closeness between Matt and Kate but the strong emphasis placed on biological study is evident. Is this an area you yourself have studied in the past?

ML: Initially, I based the novel around the ponds purely out of nostalgia. I remember the ponds where I grew up as a source of great delight. They are small worlds, after all, and if there are shelves or shallow places within them you feel as if you are seeing the whole of that world. It changes constantly, and yet it is always the same.

As the novel progressed, though, the ponds took on a wider significance. They were, as you say, as symbol of the closeness between Matt and Kate, but to me they also came to represent Kate's childhood – the period of 'innocence' before she was, as she saw it, betrayed by Matt. The trips with Matt to the ponds survived the tragedy which overtook the family at the beginning of the book, and partly through them, Kate managed to survive it too. But they did not survive Matt's 'betrayal', and in an emotional sense, neither did she. In fact, the ponds were the scene of the crime. Kate says in the book, 'By the following September the ponds themselves would have been desecrated twice over, as far as I was concerned, and for some years after that I did not visit them at all.'

Years later, when Kate decides on her choice of career, it is partly because of a fear – almost a terror – that the ponds themselves, the symbol of the golden period of her childhood, may not survive. 'I imagined myself,' she says, 'going back to them one day in the future, looking into their depths and seeing . . . nothing.'

Having set the novel around the ponds, the choice of biology as Matt's passion and Kate's later field of study was almost inevitable, but I was more than happy with that. I do not have a background in biology, but of all the sciences it is the most easily accessible to the layman, and as a subject it is so beautiful, and so fascinating, that I had no fear that readers would be put off by small passages of description.

Q. In her adult life, the breakdown of her relationship with her brother affects her relationships with other men, i.e. Daniel. What do you think is the significance of Daniel's character and why did you choose him for Kate?

ML: In spite of Kate's denial, I think Daniel is quite a lot like Matt. He would have to be pretty special for Kate to be interested in him, and he would have to be quite unusual to be interested in Kate, disillusioned and bitter as she is! She says at one point that she had never expected to admire anyone again; if

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Matt could turn out to have feet of clay, what hope was there for anyone else? And yet she admires Daniel. She sees in him the qualities that she knows she is lacking in herself – tolerance, open-mindedness, and generosity of spirit. Daniel can see the whole view, whereas Kate is blinkered by the past. He represents what she would like to have been, and just possibly might still be.

On another level though, Daniel represents what Matt should have been, and this is a problem for Kate. When she looks at Daniel, she sees all that Matt has lost.

On his side, I believe Daniel is attracted to Kate partly because of her honesty. She does not pretend, to others or to herself. It is this which is her salvation, in the end – she is able to look at her ‘picture of how things are’, and see that it is wrong.

Q. What do you think lies behind the anger and resentment between the two brothers, Matt and Luke, which results in violence?

ML: I think a lot of the tension between Luke and Matt stems from the fact that their balance of power has shifted. Until ‘the accident’, Luke was very much the lesser brother. He was a standard bored, sullen, resentful teenager, his deficiencies highlighted by comparison with his brilliant younger brother.

And then comes the accident. Traumatic though it is, I think the accident is the making of Luke. From being the family problem, he becomes the family solution. He sees that it is in his power to save the rest of the family, and he does that, at great personal cost. Perhaps he would have ‘found himself’ anyway, but it would have taken a long time. In particular, it is Bo’s overwhelming need of him that transforms Luke. No one ever needed him before, and no one adored him as she does. ‘Yeah, but she likes me,’ he says to Aunt Annie. You could say that he needed Bo every bit as much as the other way round.

So Luke is now the head of the family. He is mother and father rolled into one, and this is a problem for Matt. I don’t see Matt as being jealous or resentful by nature, but still, things have changed, and the change is hard for him to accept. He is hugely indebted to Luke, and that debt would be a heavy burden. You expect your parents to make sacrifices for you – that is what parents do – but you don’t expect it of your siblings.

To complicate matters, Matt genuinely doubts Luke’s ability to carry off his plan. His lack of faith would have been galling to Luke.

What it boils down to, I guess, is sibling rivalry, that plus the anxiety, uncertainty and grief which both boys had to deal with at the time.

Q. Did you enjoy writing this novel? And did the final ending mirror that which you had in mind when you started to write?

ML: I loved it. Initially when I answered this question, I wrote ‘I loved every minute of it.’ My husband, reading it through, scribbled, ‘That’s a load of bull. You did not. I was there.’ So for the sake of absolute



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accuracy, I've deleted 'every minute of'

I knew how it was going to end, though for a long time I couldn't work out how to get there. How to get Kate to see that she had got it wrong – that was the problem. Daniel and Marie helped me out in the end.

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