
Crow Lake
by Mary Lawson

Booklist Review:

For generations, learning has been the valued goal in Kate's family, but when her parents die, oldest brother Luke's college acceptance must be put aside so that he can keep the family together. Real help comes from their community in rural northern Canada, and the initial efforts of the two oldest brothers make it possible for the younger children, including seven-year-old Kate, to remain in a household filled with love and humor. As an adult, however, Kate, a professor of environmental science in Toronto, looks back with a sense of tragedy and loss, not so much for her parents, but for her brother Matt. The reader knows that something terrible is going to happen, although which of the dire events is deemed worst is based on the child Kate's values and judgment. Lawson achieves a breathless anticipatory quality in her surprisingly adept first novel, in which a child tells the story, but tells it very well indeed.

(Reviewed January 1, 2002) -- Danise Hoover

School Library Journal Review: Adult/High School--

Lawson sets her novel in a small farming community in northern Ontario. A mile or so away are the ponds—old gravel pits—where the Morrison children spend hours lying on their stomachs watching the life underwater. Seventeen-year-old Matt explains the wonders to his seven-year-old sister. The story begins with Kate thinking back on those days that shaped her adult life; when both parents were killed in a car accident, Luke, 19, took on the responsibility of caring for the family. Even with help from the community, bringing up a one-year-old and young Kate are frightening for him, and life is hard for all of the grief-stricken siblings. Eventually Matt drops out of school and settles in as a farmer, working for a neighbor who is an abusive husband and father. The adult Kate is a successful zoologist, but her past gets in the way of her relationship with Daniel. She can't discuss her early life and her feelings of disconnection from her family, especially beloved Matt, who, she feels, threw away his life. Kate reluctantly invites Daniel to Crow Lake with her for her nephew's birthday, where she finally comes to terms with the past. In this beautifully written first novel, the descriptions of the difficulties that the Morrises face are real, painful, humorous, and agonizing, and the characters and the setting are well defined and easily visualized. This is not a fast-paced story, but it is hard to put down.

—Sydney Hausrath, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA (Reviewed September 1, 2002) (School Library Journal, vol 48, issue 9, p256)

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */

Four children living in northern Ontario struggle to stay together after their parents die in an auto accident in Lawson's fascinating debut, a compelling and lovely study of sibling rivalry and family dynamics in which the land literally becomes a character. Kate Morrison narrates the tale in flashback mode, starting with the fatal car accident that leaves seven-year-old Kate; her toddler sister, Bo; 19-year-old Luke; and 17-year-old Matt to fend for themselves. At first they are divided up among relatives, but the plan changes when Luke gives up his teaching college scholarship to get a job and try to keep them together. The fractured family struggles mightily against the grinding rural poverty of Crow Lake, and

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the brothers conduct a fierce battle of wills to control their fate, until they both finally land jobs and the family gets some assistance from a neighbor. Unfortunately, that assistance can't overcome the deranged rage of a neighboring farmer, Cyrus Pye, and when Matt becomes involved with Pye's daughter, Maria, a tragic incident robs the brilliant young man of a chance to pursue a career as a naturalist. Kate goes on to become a zoologist at a Toronto college and marry a fellow academic, but her frustration with her brother's fate renders her unable to return to Crow Lake to visit him until the pivotal climax. Lawson delivers a potent combination of powerful character writing and gorgeous description of the land. Her sense of pace and timing is impeccable throughout, and she uses dangerous winter weather brilliantly to increase the tension as the family battles to survive. This is a vibrant, resonant novel by a talented writer whose lyrical, evocative writing invites comparisons to Rick Bass and Richard Ford. (Mar.)

— *Staff (Reviewed March 4, 2002) (Publishers Weekly, vol 249, issue 9, p58)*

Library Journal Review:

Kate Morrison, the quietly complicated narrator of this lovely first novel of tangled tragedies, relives childhood events in the small Canadian farming community of Crow Lake, Ont., during a family reunion. When Kate is only seven, her parents are killed in a car accident, and her 19-year-old brother, Luke, relinquishes academic success to keep the siblings together. Instead, it is Matt, 17 and brilliant, who reluctantly and guiltily agrees to finish high school and go on to college, all the while sharing in the care of Kate and her baby sister, the hilarious, scene-stealing Bo. The violent, secretive history of the neighboring Pye family intrudes into the Morrissions' fragile system, detonating Matt's plans, and it is ultimately Kate who escapes into an academic career of challenge and respectability. Elegant, beautifully paced, and deeply resonant of the fears of children too young to have a vocabulary to express such feelings, this is a terrific debut. Nine countries were wise enough to buy the rights. Highly recommended for all public libraries.

[Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ11/1/01.]—Beth E. Andersen, Ann Arbor Dist. Lib., MI (Reviewed February 15, 2002) (Library Journal, vol 127, issue 3, p178)