

Review: Darren Greer's *Advocate* and Elaine McCluskey's *The Most Heartless Town in Canada* explore rural Nova Scotia

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Advocate

By Darren Greer, *Cormorant*, 256 pages, \$22.95

The Most Heartless Town in Canada

By Elaine McCluskey, *Anvil*, 288 pages, \$20

In an interview regarding his novel *Hate: A Romance*, about how “the Left became the Right” in France during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s, French novelist Tristan Garcia once told me: “The novel is the art of the one who came just a little bit too late. It’s often a way of trying to relive as an adult the time of one’s childhood.”

Garcia, who was born in 1981, was far from politically conscious during the time he writes about. But it was exactly his relation to that time, and the epidemic’s position within time – “in the limbo of History and current affairs ... a comatose period that hasn’t yet entered History books, but is already more or less out of the headlines” – that inspired him to write.

I thought of Garcia’s comments recently while reading Darren Greer’s new novel, *Advocate*, a book unlike *Hate* except for its subject, AIDS, here set in the fictional small, inland town of Advocate, somewhere near Trenton, N.S. *Advocate* opens in 2008. Jacob is a counsellor at an HIV support network in Toronto when his mother calls him home: His grandmother is dying.

Jump to 1984 and another return: Jacob is 11 when his uncle, David, arrives in Advocate ill with an unnamed disease. The bulk of *Advocate* recounts David’s final months, with occasional cuts to the present, where Jacob faces a difficult decision regarding this history.

Garcia’s remarks relate to *Advocate* in how they outline a set of issues about the AIDS epidemic’s particular position in time – in history, in the author’s time, in queer time – that touch on efforts to bear witness to and to memorialize the epidemic in fiction.

In an artist’s statement, Greer says: “The inspiration for *Advocate* came from two places: my own experience growing up under the shadow of AIDS in the 80s and 90s, and the death of my

friend Steve in 98 ... I knew I would never forget Steve, but I wanted to make sure the world did not forget him, and men like him, either.”

“The novel is the art of the one who came just a little bit too late” – Greer was 16 in 1984. His character, by comparison, is five years younger. Jacob (I’m not giving much away here) is gay, his sexual awakening uncomfortably simultaneous with his uncle’s wasting away down the hall. That David’s disease is tied, even if only by association, to Jacob’s own sexuality has a profound effect on Jacob.

Some readers might question how much of a witness Jacob can amount to, but I am reminded of what Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote about witnessing the death camps: “We, the survivors are not the true witnesses. The true witnesses, those in full possession of the terrible truth, are the drowned.”

If an analogous statement can be made about HIV/AIDS, Mike Hoolboom’s contribution to [*You Only Live Twice*](#) might come closest to Levi’s true witness (though thankfully, Hoolboom, who lives with HIV, survives). Still, none of us know in our own bodies the terrible conclusion to this disease. We feel morally compelled to remember it anyway.

Advocate’s driving emotion is gay rage, spurred by injustice: The town that raised David turns on him in his moment of need. Jacob remembers his uncle’s pariah status and Advocate’s ignorance-fuelled hysteria, though it seems to him that no one else does.

For many peoples, time bears scars marking moments of pervasive trauma. These moments mark not only turning points in history, but borders of incommensurability with the past. In his contribution to *Queers Were Here: Heroes & Icons of Queer Canada*, historian RJ Gilmour writes about how the AIDS epidemic marked such a moment in queer time: “The learning of these elders disappeared with their dying bodies. We were losing precious repositories of knowledge as the epidemic culled an entire generation ... AIDS not only ravaged the bodies of individuals and their friends and lovers, it created a cultural vacuum, disrupting conduits of knowledge from one generation to the next.”

In the decades since David’s death, Jacob’s anger morphs into a seething resentment over what he sees as the town’s denial of its part in producing this scar tissue. As the novel’s title suggests, Advocate is a central character in the story, which is not only about the epidemic in time but in place. David’s journey back to Advocate is emblematic: Many young gay men who escaped their home towns to find freedom in the big city returned to those same, often hostile, towns in their dying months because they had nowhere else to go. How will Advocate bear witness to its part in this history?

A different kind of witnessing is at play in *The Most Heartless Town in Canada*, Elaine McCluskey’s most recent novel, also about a fictional Nova Scotia town. Like Advocate, Myrtle – a town of 4,000, an hour’s drive from Halifax – is unremarkable: not pretty, not prosperous; it isn’t even on the ocean. What Myrtle has is a poultry plant, where dumped entrails attract a convocation of bald-headed eagles, which the town hopes will, in turn, attract tourists. Instead, a

grisly event brings news crews, including a Toronto columnist famous for her hit-and-run pieces on small-town “dying Canada.”

Our Country, as the series is called, is a bald attempt to stoke city readers’ sense of superiority by presenting gothic visions of small-town freaks and yokels. (McCluskey, a former Canadian Press bureau chief, is spot-on in her media criticism.) Myrtle’s blankness to those who don’t know it leaves it vulnerable to definition from the outside. When an outsider quoted in the *Tribune* column casually dubs Myrtle “the most heartless town in Canada,” the moniker sticks.

The Most Heartless Town in Canada is explicitly about bearing false witness to a place and what that does to the people there. (It’s also extremely funny.) For the two narrators, teens featured in a famous photo that accompanied the *Tribune* hit piece, the only restitution is in testifying Myrtle’s truth.

Myrtle is far from a heartless town. Is Advocate? “Advocate” of course has literal meanings (the town was named after a Lutheran minister’s sermon demanding his congregants be advocates for the faith). Advocate is full of advocates of various stripes; *Advocate*, the title, could refer to the town or it could be a call to action. *Advocate*, the book, is a deeply moving novel that finds resolution somewhere between those meanings.

Jade Colbert covers Canadian independent publishers and debut authors for The Globe and Mail.