

Fact, fiction merge in Myrtle

PAUL W. BENNETT

Published October 2, 2016 - 3:07pm

Small town Nova Scotia; common folk, uncommon experiences



Everyday life in the fictional town of Myrtle, N.S. — population 4,000, an hour outside Halifax — is shattered by a revealing photo that lives on in infamy. Snatched from the pages of a national newspaper, The Toronto Tribune, the snapshot image captures the crude stereotype of rural Nova Scotia as a kind of Northern Appalachia.

Two lost teenage souls standing in front of the town's courthouse appear wearing vacant looks and sporting a pink jogging suit and a silly T-shirt. Together with a controversy-stirring feature story on the shocking killing of Myrtle's eight bald eagles, it's just the type of caricature to produce lasting shame.

Positioning herself as Rita van Loon, the girl shown in the photo beside her friend Hubert Hansen, author Elaine McCluskey conveys the depth of the embarrassment caused by the paper's expose of an unfairly labelled heartless and "hokey" town.

Before the news media descended upon the town to cover the tragic demise of the bald eagles, Rita's whole world was relatively happy, defined by her protective mother and sustained by her involvement with the hapless Otters Swim Team.

Her swimming mates are a real cast of unique, slightly oddball teen characters, frequently exasperating their ambitious, foul-mouthed but endearing coach Pammy Pottie.

The book's title, *The Most Heartless Town in Canada*, is deeply ironic. The fictional Myrtle — with its county courthouse, poultry plant and community pool — is distinctive for its ordinariness, until one looks deeper in a way that escapes big-city journalists.

As Rita notes, with uncanny accuracy, "I am a real person, you see, and not a symbol of that far-flung constellation known as dying Canada."

What emerges, through a variety of richly detailed scenes in this rather surprising novel, is a largely sympathetic rendering of the intimate, reciprocal, light-hearted and often tender relationships fostered in smaller, more familiar places.

The novel is McCluskey's fifth book and it demonstrates, once again, the Dartmouth author's dash of energy, witty turn of phrase and quirky attention to detail.

Just as she did for the working class of Old Halifax in her 2009 debut novel *Going Fast*, McCluskey takes the local and familiar, the ironic and tragic, and through searing insight, sardonic observation and character analysis, spins memorable personal stories.

Like many of Canada's most gifted novelists, McCluskey draws upon her own personal experiences, as the mother of children who swam for the Dartmouth Crusaders Swim Club. While the swim club depicted in the novel is totally unlike her own local club, the passages about teen swim club activities crackle with authenticity.

Some of this book's humorous wit and playful little barbs give away her lineage — as the daughter of Dartmouth's living legend, Gloria McCluskey.

McCluskey's intriguing, intricately woven novel does invite comparison with some telling scenes from the haunting 1993 film, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, starring a young Johnny Depp and set in a dreary, out-of-the-way small Iowa town. While McCluskey's Myrtle, N.S., is peopled by its own cast of unusual local characters, it's a far kinder, gentler and more benign place on this earth.

As a former Canadian Press reporter, the author is well positioned to offer a gentle rebuke to major metropolitan newspapers which routinely fly in reporters to file local stories. Leading with the “good stuff” — a local oddity, startling fact or exotic discovery — is a staple of reporting on life on the periphery.

In the case of Myrtle, the Toronto media descends upon the town to feast upon a truly tragic “story,” the alleged “massacre” of eight eagles who had been circling the entrails behind the town’s poultry plant. That rivals the better-known real-life story focusing on the burning cross discovered on the front lawn of an African-Canadian family home a few years ago.

McCluskey’s vivid description of the alleged eagle massacre demonstrates that she is clearly acquainted with, and takes a dim view of, fly-in journalism titillating readers with the aptly termed “spin and torque” technique.

Small town people in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, as the author shows, look at the world through a different lens. Rita and her father Matthew exhibit that outlook in spades.

When the TV crews show up outside the poultry plant, they expect the worst.

Watching the news coverage of the “shocking story” of the alleged butchering by unidentified locals of eight of the “majestic creatures,” Rita mutters, “Oh, my God,” and her father replies, “It’s Myrtle.”

That down-home verbal exchange stands out as authentic, unvarnished and deeply revealing, just like this whole splendid novel packed with fascinating, entertaining little stories.

Paul W. Bennett, Director of Schoolhouse Consulting, is the author of eight books, including *The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia* (2013).