

## McCluskey's complex small town terrific

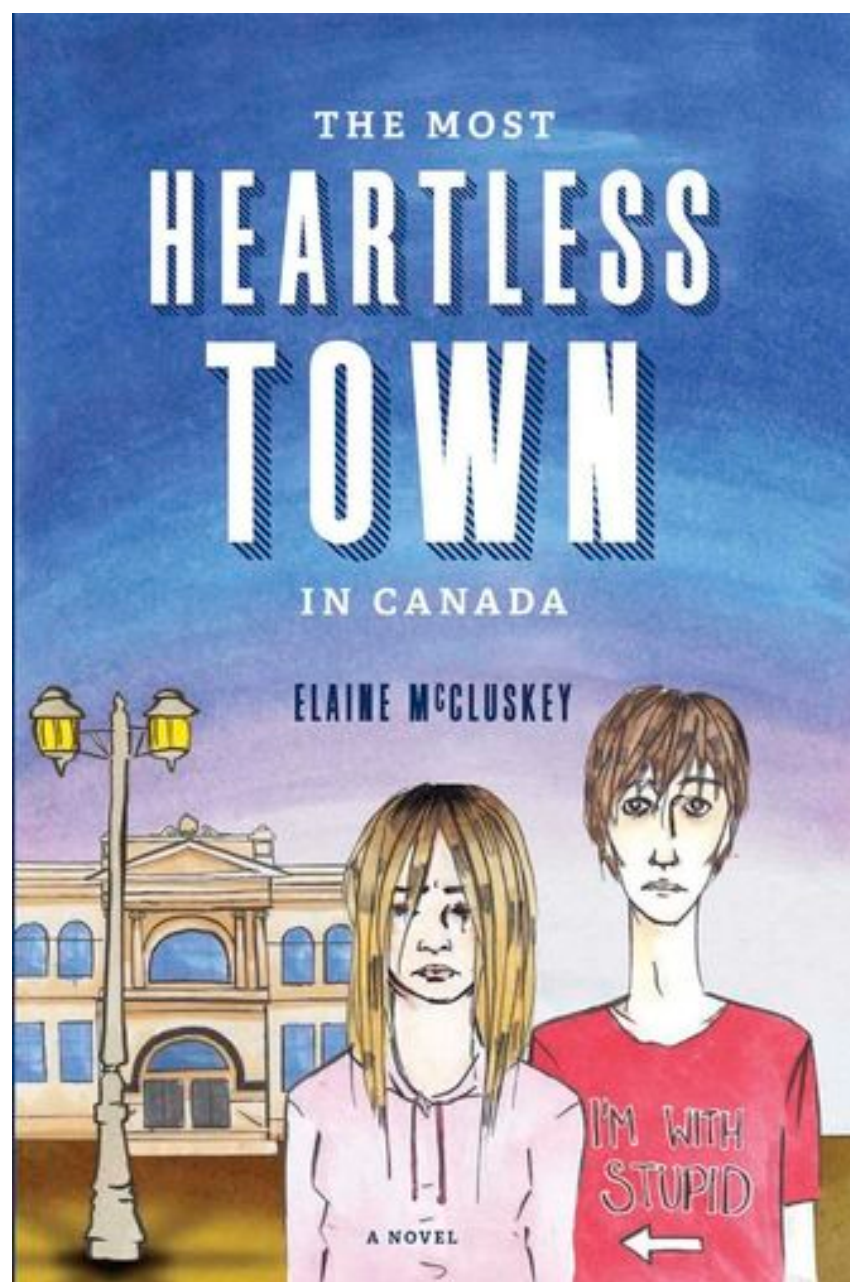
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Posted: **07/30/2016 4:00 AM**

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Set in Myrtle, N.S. — population 4,000 — writer Elaine McCluskey's fifth book, *The Most Heartless Town in Canada*, is playful, witty and, most importantly, has depth and heart.

The novel's protagonists, Rita van Loon and Hubert Hansen, recount the circumstances surrounding the killing of Myrtle's eight bald eagles. The incident is made infamous by a grotesque contest-winning photo of Rita and Hubert and described in a *Toronto Tribune* article that patronizes and mocks their community.



Before the crime takes place, Rita's world is defined by her exasperatingly supportive mother and by her involvement in Myrtle's floundering swim team. The Otters include Drew Brinkerhoff, the overweight, irreverent, media hog and self-reported mind reader; Austin Moskovich, the sarcastic grudge-holding boy with an overbite; and the slow and sexual Georgina Vogel, who indiscriminately calls boys, parents and teachers alike "hotties." McCluskey's teenagers will make the reader laugh out loud as they frustrate their ambitious, foul-mouthed but well-meaning coach Pammy.

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Amateur swimming includes cut-throat competition, corruption, predatory coaches and fraudulent masseuses. It's a world where adults' lack of judgment could have dire consequences for the children in their care.

Hubert and his mother are dealing with grief and poverty after the accidental death of Hubert's father.

After they move to Myrtle from St. John's, N.L., Hubert has to take care of himself. Walking at night with his extraordinary dog, Scampy, Hubert discovers his gabby neighbour Al's drug-dealing operation and Myrtle's other secrets.

While the shifts between Rita's and Hubert's perspectives can be disorienting at times, and the community's numerous characters take some work to keep straight, McCluskey pulls it off. She presents a complex small town that in spite of its "eagle-murder" infamy is both intriguing and ordinary. And that's OK, "Because (as Rita explains) most of our world is ordinary, and many of the things that aren't — tornadoes, hereditary dictatorships and Ponzi schemes — are not that great."

In her novel, McCluskey includes dubious sports stories, conflicting obituaries and newspaper headlines such as *Is happiness a perfect piece of fudge?* She signals, from the very first page, that we should not believe everything we read, and that easy generalizations about people and places should be challenged. As exemplified by Maggie Delany — the unscrupulous journalist who labels Myrtle "the Most Heartless Town in Canada" — newspapers have their own agendas, and journalists include individuals with axes to grind, whether they live in Toronto or small-town Nova Scotia.

Although many mysteries get resolved by the novel's end, both Rita and Hubert confess they haven't shared all.

Small Canadian communities have their own character. For Myrtle, this central quality, Hubert reveals, is privacy, both a strength and a weakness: "Myrtle helped me survive by giving me space, by not noticing my pain. By letting me latch onto haphazard things, and it's ironic that same diffidence allowed something bad to happen."

McCluskey is a wickedly funny storyteller at her best, as sharp as she is compassionate. Her voice is modern, and she's unafraid to play with structure and take on current topics such as media representation, the rural and urban divide and parenting — issues relevant no matter whether living in urban centres or in small towns.

Barbara Romanik resides in Winnipeg and is a fiction writer, editor and an academic.