

Joan Clark. *Latitudes of Melt.*

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## REVIEWS

Joan Clark. *Latitudes of Melt*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2000, ISBN 0-676-97288-8

NEARLY A CENTURY after the disaster that claimed approximately 1,500 lives, the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* continues to haunt the imagination. Although *Latitudes of Melt*, Joan Clark's latest novel, begins shortly after the vessel sinks off the coast of Newfoundland, it is not the author's intention to investigate or represent the "real" events associated with this historical occurrence. As the title indicates, Clark is on the trail of something much more spectral, something more difficult to locate and describe. As the late Ethel Wilson so elliptically expressed it, "Life is a difficult country. But it is our home." Although the ocean, like life, is, Clark writes, a "trough of sorrow," it has the ability to bestow gifts as well as griefs.

The novel begins with a powerful and astonishing scene: in the early morning hours of 15 April 1912 a small child in a makeshift cradle emerges like an apparition from the mists of Avalon and is rescued from a floating ice pan by two fishermen stranded in the pack ice and fog. Named Aurora because she has been miraculously rescued at dawn, the child is retrieved and carried ashore where she is lovingly raised by the St. Croix family in The Drook, a tiny settlement situated on the shore of Trepassey Bay on the Island's 'Southern Shore.' Suspecting that the child with her family had been travelling across the Atlantic on the *Titanic* before it hit the iceberg and sank, Merla and Francis St. Croix try to uncover the mystery of the child's origins, but to no avail. And so "*in splendid isolation*" Aurora grows into "wandering" womanhood. Reminiscent of Wordsworth's Lucy, Aurora, like generations of ordinary island women before her, lives largely "unknown," marries, bears children, buries a husband, and after a long, abundant life dies and is laid to rest in the land that salvaged and sheltered her. But before her passing, Aurora's connection with the *Titanic* is revealed and her kin across the sea discovered.

Richly textured and constructed with "exquisite symmetry," this novel is about many things: memory and loss, departure and return, spirit and sorrow, shifts in relationships, and the enduring power of language whether it is spoken, written, or merely imagined as when Aurora converses with Tom, her long-dead husband:

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When I'm talking to Tom I'm perfectly aware that I'm talking to myself, that if he were to speak to me his language would be entirely different from the one we use every day with its burden of purpose and information. Long ago, his voice would have changed into something as garbled and baffling as water running over stones, an intricacy of rhythm and sound that defies translation. Or his voice could be something as familiar and lonely as the cry of a gull. I could well be listening to him without knowing that I was. (258)

As in many of her earlier works, in *Latitudes of Melt* Clark shows how human lives are guided as much by fate or chance as they are by design. But at its most elemental level, the novel investigates the often unseverable thread connecting mothers and their offspring, a thread that sometimes not even death can sever. At the same time, Clark affirms that all givers of life, like the seas themselves, hold within them the "power to bend the tide."

As we have come to expect from Clark, in *Latitudes of Melt* she gives us an intimate glimpse into the "lives of girls and women," a view often presented from unusual perspectives. For example, early in the novel a young child recollects her own birth; and in the powerful denouement, a son bears witness to his mother's timely death, her final "fantastic leap into the beyond where there are no maps or globes, where the untamed universe swirls with the essence of the born and the unborn in galaxies of unimaginable darkness and light." With its many references to other realms ("fabled Vinland," "the Island of the Blessed," fairyland) and other states of being, this novel is a powerful celebration of life, imagined places and the after-life.

Yet in a novel with such earnest and diverse themes, there are some delightfully ironic turns. For example, the fiercely independent and likeable Maggie Hunt, passionately opposed to Newfoundland's union with Canada, meets an untimely death when she falls, hitting her head "on the iron replica of the Canadian wolf in the hallway, which the Hunts used as a boot scraper" (260).

This work also affirms the relevance of many different types of texts and artifacts as historical records: hymns, hooked rugs, family letters, "wander books," ship-wrecked novels, doctoral theses, lighthouse diaries, wall icons, sketches, and personal inscriptions on community gravestones. All are intrinsically valuable and valued.

Some of the richest, most textured sections of the novel are those that evoke a particular palette, the wild barren landscape of the southern Avalon peninsula celebrated by visual artists like Gerald Squires: "After tea we drive to St. Shott's, my window opened wide to allow an unobstructed view of the Barrens. Today they're a muted colour, not quite brown, not quite green. The colour is interrupted by islands of snow and frozen ponds that throw the light back to the sky." In lyrical passages strangely reminiscent of David Blackwood scenes (e.g., "Island Funeral" or "June Visit Home"), Clark draws our attention to the barely perceptible beauty of the peninsula's marshland (sheep laurel, Labrador tea, and pearly everlasting) which alleviates the harsh, northern austerity of a grim and rocky land.

In her novel, Clark acknowledges the influence of her own particular “tribe,” in particular other Newfoundland artists such as Anne Meredith Barry (whose paintings of the Southern Shore are frequently evoked in Clark’s narrative) and folklorist Barbara Reiti (allusions to Reiti’s *Strange Terrain*, a study in Newfoundland fairylore, contribute to Clark’s depiction of Newfoundland’s folk culture), as well as local artisans, musicians, poets and novelists. One of Meredith Barry’s paintings, “From My Studio Window #10,” aptly selected for the novel’s jacket cover, is strangely evocative of a passage from E.J. Pratt’s *Titanic* (1935): “The sky was moonless but the sea flung back / With greater brilliance half the zodiac.”

*Latitudes of Melt* discloses what Patricia Hampl refers to as “sojourns into the land of memory.” In the process it raises important questions about how stories originate, how we “dream memory, not fiction,” how communal knowledge is transmitted and received, and why at times we are mysteriously inclined to keep the company of certain souls. One of the epigraphs to *Latitudes of Melt* is a fragment of a poem, “Grief and the Sea” by Don McKay: “The sea as it spends itself / can teach us how to grieve.” Perhaps, Clark suggests, if we truly listen to the seductive sirens and songs of the sea, we may learn how to live more fully, how to weather life’s many storms, and perhaps even how to die with greater dignity and fewer regrets.

The author of a dozen works of fiction, Clark is an adept weaver of the real and the imaginary. At its best, her prose has the clear intensity and the hypnotic power of the icy blue stars that illuminate a late November sky over Quidi Vidi.

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Harry A. Cuff et al., eds. *Where Once We Stood. The Newfoundland Quarterly 100th Anniversary Anthology*. Harry Cuff Publications, St. John’s, 2001, ISBN 1-896338-21-6

AS ITS SUBTITLE suggests, this volume celebrates the 100th anniversary of *The Newfoundland Quarterly*. The editors of *Where Once We Stood* have therefore assembled a selection of material from past issues, including articles, short stories, poetry, memoirs, book reviews, and photographs. Many of the contributors and supporters of the *Quarterly* appearing in its pages read like a “Who’s Who” of Newfoundland literature, history, and culture — George Story, Michael Harrington, Patrick O’Flaherty, Paul O’Neill, Percy Janes, Leslie Harris, Art Scammell, and others. The year 2001 also marked the centenary of the first successful trans-Atlantic wireless signal, received by Guglielmo Marconi on Signal Hill in St. John’s. Several of the pieces in *Where Once We Stood* therefore also commemorate that “signal” event, together with the radio communications developments that ensued. Other events and developments that hold significance for Newfoundland and Labrador are also featured, from the sealing disaster of 1914 to the “tidal wave” of