

Kate Evans, *Where Old Ghosts Meet*

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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primary sources are dominated overwhelmingly by those who controlled and spoke for the interests of religious institutions, and who drew dark veils across these popular practices. Nonetheless, the ability of this book to open our eyes and reveal so much is a considerable accomplishment.

William Westfall
York University

Kate Evans, *Where Old Ghosts Meet*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-550813-27-2.

KATE EVANS'S *Where Old Ghosts Meet* is a thoughtful, elegantly written novel set in 1972 about Nora Molloy's search for family history in Cullen, Ireland, and Shoal Cove, Newfoundland. When her father dies, Nora embarks on a journey to discover what happened to Matthew Molloy, her grandfather, who disappeared from Ireland when her father was a young boy. He had been considered a sort of pariah for leaving his wife and child alone in Cullen to fend for themselves. In Shoal Cove, Nora meets Peg Barry, who knew Matthew Molloy. They spend several days together while Peg tells Nora everything she can about Matthew, much of it being secrets she had to keep to herself to prevent any further small-town gossip about her from circulating. Evans does an excellent job of depicting the kind of life that Peg's character lived, surrounded by the tight-knit outport community of Berry Island, and the way that the presence of an outsider like Matthew, especially one with a questionable past, could separate her from the community that is her home. Evans weaves Nora's search for stories about Matthew together with scenes from the past that illustrate the poignancy of events such as Matthew's admission to Peg that he is married and his eventual struggle with Alzheimer's.

Matthew is a character in the fullest sense of the word, possessing extremes that are almost puzzling in scope. For example, his personal qualities include enthusiasm and creativity in his public role as a schoolteacher, which is juxtaposed with his capacity to humiliate and ridicule those same students in private situations. Through discussions with the local priest and one of Matthew's former students, Nora, who intends to find the truth about why her grandfather left his family in Cullen, eventually learns what he was actually like, "warts and all" (158), and bravely listens to stories that would be difficult to hear. These include his problems with alcohol and his erratic nature, which appears in his way of suddenly leaving Peg after her admission of love for him, only to return seven years later, out of the blue.

Evans adds another dimension to Matthew's character through an exploration of the complexities of belonging. On a surface level, the idea of belonging in an outport community such as Berry Island appears to be simple: one is born and raised there, knows everyone, and is able to rely on the community as a support network. However, Evans explores the concept of belonging further through Matthew's

character. Matthew is buried on Berry Island because, as Peg says, “it was where he belonged” (160), but of course, Matthew is not from the island but from Ireland, and came to the island to teach school and happened to board with Peg. Nonetheless, he belongs there because he belongs with Peg. In theory, Matthew would belong in his home community of Cullen, but it is evident from the events that take place there that he could never be at home in a place where he cannot find any peace. Before he left Ireland, Matthew joined the priesthood but could not tolerate living in the monastery. He then returns to Cullen only to be tricked into marriage by a young woman (Nora’s grandmother) who wants to get out from under her brother’s thumb. How could Matthew possibly belong in a place where he has been stripped of his dignity and would have no option but to suffer in quiet, lifelong misery? Matthew belongs with Peg on Berry Island because there he finds a home, a sense of belonging, and acceptance. Although he does not actually fit in with the other men on the island because he does not do “real men’s work,” he does belong with Peg. In this novel, belonging has as much to do with the chemistry of relationships as it does with geography, if not more. Thus, Evans successfully avoids the kinds of clichés about belonging that would be easy to engage in a retrospective novel about an outport community in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Although Matthew is definitely interesting, I found myself wondering about Nora. I admired her ability to sit calmly and patiently through what would be a trying experience: travelling to Shoal Cove to solve a family mystery that has been locked away in secrecy. As a character, Nora demonstrates strength in her attempt to discover the truth about Matthew, and in accepting the truth once she finally learns it. Her visit to the abandoned community on Berry Island is a bold reminder that the past really is in the past and that present circumstances can be very different. Buildings have “keeled over” (245) and she reflects on how it is a good thing that Peg has not been back to see the house. Evans succeeds in demonstrating that the past in the imagination and in memory can be very different from the way places are found in the present. Specific times and places are etched in memory while time keeps passing in the real world that is subject to perpetual change.

Nora’s encounter with Matthew lies somewhere in the nebulous realm of ghostly presences. While she is in the house on Berry Island she “had the feeling she was being watched” and “[s]he spun around, terrified” (251). She wonders if what Matthew had wanted all along was “solitude” (251), which, of course, he now has. Evans thus ends her novel with uncomfortable semi-resolution. Matthew’s character is further revealed through the last pages of the novel. The idea of his restless spirit inhabiting the only place he ever thought of as home is unsettling. Evans concludes the novel on a note of intellectual uncertainty, an appropriate way to end a story about secrets, memory, and difficult questions about the past.

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