

## Elisabeth de Mariaffi. *The Devil You Know*

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Coles has cited Lisa Moore as an important influence, which comes through in some of the vivid, careful imagery and the focus on what's going on in people's heads, not to mention the presence of Newfoundland. Where the stories feel more raucous than Moore, their energy is akin to that of Zoe Whittall, or — to cite an east coast example — Christy Ann Conlin's *Heave*. These comparisons are entirely complimentary; this is a collection full of charm and skill. Whole personal histories are suggested in a few sparse pages, which is, of course, the particular magic of short fiction as a genre. And in response to these personal histories, readers are led through a range of rewarding reactions: curiosity, amusement, discomfort, and ultimately, empathy.

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Elisabeth de Mariaffi. *The Devil You Know*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015. ISBN: 978-1476779089

The truth is that most crime novels are not really about crime. Crime is a violation both physical and existential. Whether it is assault, a sexual offence, or theft, the victims are changed. Their sense of identity and of the natural order is bent, and often permanently broken. They can never quite feel safe again when their spaces or bodies or both have been trespassed. Murder, of course, creates multiple victims. People who once loved those now dead, people who knew them in passing, even those who watch a report on the evening news may find themselves contemplating the dark implications of the irrationality of why some of us live while others die too young and in agony. Thrillers and mystery novels, in general, are antidotes against the fear, reshaping what should be profoundly disturbing into entertainment. The victim becomes merely the initiator of a process leading to a reasonable resolution. Murder will out, malefactors are punished, and isn't that fun? It is all a game, tricking us into mistaking a very real and vicious bear for a bush.

*The Devil You Know*, however, is more than a simple mystery or thriller. A superior page-turner, it also has a great deal to say about crime in the world as opposed to crime in the world of entertainment. The author, Elisabeth De

Mariaffi, lives in St. John's, but the novel is set in Toronto in 1993, depicting a city tested by "the Scarborough Rapist" and a succession of child murders. The viewpoint character, Evie Jones, is a 21-year-old reporter obsessed with the murder of a childhood friend, and perhaps because of her obsession is asked to assemble a "dead girl feature," a retrospective on similar murders. When Evie was 10, her closest friend, Lianna, went to practice for a track meet. She disappeared and was never seen alive again. Her brutalized body was found some days later in Taylor Creek Park. The prime suspect, Robert Cameron, was never apprehended, perhaps escaping into the United States, perhaps faking his own death. Evie understandably was traumatized by these horrible events and has never gotten past them, so her assignment revives the memories of the time. None of this is what makes the novel remarkable. A traumatized detective seeking justice for a nearly forgotten victim is a common trope in crime writing, as is the journalist detective. The novel is least compelling when it does the obligatory elements, the revelations and the confrontation with the bad guy. However, the best pleasures in the best thrillers are in the intensity of the journey, not the familiar necessities that mark it as a thriller.

What sets this novel apart is more than the fine exercising of the usual crime-writing structures and techniques. Few novels, even those "based on a true story," connect so convincingly with the reality of their time and place. The scut work of newspaper reporters, especially those on the first rungs of their careers, is usually not portrayed in fiction any better than the real work of private detectives, but de Mariaffi is pitch perfect at capturing the attitudes, the process, the smell of the stale coffee, and the otherworldliness of late hours in the newspaper's morgue. Instead of the generic city that is often the setting of detective novels, her Toronto is distinctly Toronto. When she sets action in an area like Kensington or on Spadina, she captures the feeling quickly, but very effectively. This isn't an easy thing to do with Toronto, which frequently masquerades as other cities for motion pictures. It is also notable that she does not avoid the names of actual murder victims or references to the case of Paul Bernardo, the aforementioned "Scarborough Rapist." He had just been arrested at the time of the story, though his murderous *folie à deux* with Karla Homolka had not yet been revealed. In many novels, reference to actual cases seems exploitative, as if the voltage of the story isn't high enough and the author is depending on the true crime to increase the power of her or his own unconvincing narrative. In *The Devil You Know*, the references not only seem appropriate, but essential to the themes being developed in the fiction.

Evie's story is more than just an entertaining yarn. It captures the feeling

of the awful transition from childhood to adulthood, when we discover that things are not what they seem and that the dividing line between good and evil is obscure at best. Evie is attempting to understand this in herself, but also for society as a whole. When and why did we as a culture become afraid to allow our children to walk to school? Why do we fear the kindly stranger? How did we come to suspect even people close to us of being capable of evil? Do we live in irrational fear because we are bombarded by the media with sensational but unusual crimes? De Mariaffi catches the paranoia of contemporary life vividly, and never lets it go. Even more so, she grasps the state of mind that accompanies the foreboding that any moment any one of us, particularly women, could become a target of violence and even blame ourselves for it. Can we attract evil by thinking about it, as Evie's friend warns her? Is it possible to dress or to walk in a way that invites victimization? How much is the sense of the danger around us the product of the imagination? This is an excellent novel, excellently written. When Evie is afraid, the reader is afraid, recognizing not just the details of reality, but the familiar, palpable feeling of it, the warm breath on our necks of the devil we know.

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Michael Crummey. *Sweetland*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2014.  
ISBN: 978-0385663168 (hardcover)

*Sweetland* is a haunting novel whose main character, Moses Sweetland, stays long in our mind. We may consider him to be the personification of the scarred, rocky, wounded geography of the Newfoundland outport, and still his relevance is not reduced to his capacity to become a symbol or a faithful representation of a traumatic and recurrent episode in Newfoundland history. What allows this novel to really add a potential of poetry and knowledge to a previous literary tradition are the special textual strategies that Michael Crummey brings into play in his narrative so that we can feel his world intensely.

We follow Sweetland's perceptions of his surroundings continuously, and what we see and hear is told to us as in whispers. We have the impression that