

Lisa Moore, ed. *Hard Ticket*

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BOOK REVIEW

Lisa Moore, ed. *Hard Ticket*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2022.
ISBN 978-1-550-81827-7

Hard Ticket is the third collection of Newfoundland fiction, edited by Lisa Moore, to be published by Breakwater Books in the past decade, and the most expansive yet. The second anthology, *Us, Now* (2021), highlighted fiction by racialized Newfoundlanders, and a number of these authors reappear in *Hard Ticket* with new contributions. With *Hard Ticket*, Moore offers 17 new stories from authors writing in Newfoundland, each presenting a unique glimpse of Newfoundland's robust literary landscape, with an impressive variation in genre and approach. The book cover defines the term *hard ticket* for readers unfamiliar with the provincial slang — "*noun* (Nfld) a lively character, a tough or headstrong person, someone not easily controlled" — and the stories within create their own definition that reflects and expands on this. Characters in *Hard Ticket* are headstrong and lively, they are independent, and they are often also lonely. In these stories, being a *hard ticket* often becomes a way of navigating through loss and the complexity of grief with fierce determination.

In Michelle Porter's "Snow Blower," a young girl commits casual patricide. In Terry Doyle's "What Kind of Dog Is He?" a man becomes convinced that his dog hates him after the dog stares directly into an eclipse. In "Twilight Airs, Iron, Water," Tzu-Hao Hsu describes the loss of a beloved grandfather and channels the life of this character through a series of touching vignettes. "Eight Months to a Year" from Xavier Michael Campbell arrives near the midway point and acts as an anchor. One of the collection's strongest stories, it describes the

loneliness of a partner experiencing a sudden lapse in brain function, or an overload of the brain's supplementary motor area, punctuated with intimate flashbacks to the day before. "The day before the day I noticed nothing would be the same was a normal, phenomenal day," Campbell writes (73). He describes a couple having sex at sunrise on the first page and the image of the red light over the St. John's harbour drenches the story, burning into the mind's eye of the reader. This vivid scene comes into contrast with the cold, clinical hospital rooms to follow, a testament to Campbell's talent with imagery.

These stories are abundant with images that stir the senses; they bring the reader on a dynamic journey where the warmth of the sun is followed by a punch to the gut. Moore describes her curatorial vision in the introduction: "I wanted stories the reader experienced through her nose and eyes and ears and fingertips, and of course, all the organs" (9). Later, she reminds us that "the stories in this anthology come into the hands of readers at a particular moment in history." These two sentiments converge most viscerally in Carmella Gray-Cosgrove's "Remains of Conception," a story about abortion and motherhood placed in the hands of readers at a time when reproductive rights are under siege. Gray-Cosgrove describes an abortion with imagery that will rouse the senses of readers, both those familiar with the feeling of a speculum being cranked open inside of them and those who aren't. Gray-Cosgrove's story also alludes to a familiar motif of fiction set in a small city when her character's abortion technician turns out to be a friend of her neighbour.

In a place where familiar faces pop up in abortion clinics, those who travel to Newfoundland from away can often carry a special social capital. Matthew Hollet alludes to this phenomenon in "The City Wears Thin," when one of his characters describes moving to St. John's from Halifax: "I didn't grow up here, so it feels fresh. And it works the other way around, like sometimes it feels like I'm more interesting here? As if people like to meet me" (140). In Olivia Robertson's "Effie," this figure of the enigmatic outsider takes the shape of a Danish exchange student, a childhood best friend who fills the young protago-

nist's world with possibility and leaves her longing in her wake. In "The Flat Freshie Blue-Star Test" from Heidi Wicks, this figure is Marcia, an Australian woman whose very presence in Newfoundland reminds a young woman named Jane of life outside her immediate surroundings and breaks the spell of Jane's infatuation with her mediocre boyfriend.

Prajwala Dixit's "Ēkatra" describes a different version of arriving in Newfoundland: the experience of arriving on the island as a racialized immigrant. Dixit writes the story of a woman who travels to Newfoundland from India, and her at times difficult experience navigating the province and being understood there, both linguistically and culturally. Meera's present-day scenes are punctuated by letters written by her great-grandmother's sister, Nandini, a woman who immigrated to St. John's from India in the late nineteenth century to study medicine. Dixit includes untranslated dialogue in Marathi script in her prose. As a result, only Marathi-speaking readers will fully grasp the story, and those unfamiliar must reflect on the experience of being alienated by language in this way, a feeling that Meera faces daily in St. John's. "How she wished Jack knew how intelligent she sounded in Marathi," Dixit writes, describing Meera's relationship with a St. John's landlord.

Familiar motifs appear in moments, but the stories in *Hard Ticket* offer a wide-ranging, diverse illustration of Newfoundland fiction. Though the majority of authors stay close to realism, Sobia Shaheen Shaikh shakes up this uniformity with a magical-realist narrative about sexual harassment in a university and the ghosts, both literal and figurative, that this harassment leaves in its wake. Some stories are firmly set in Newfoundland, such as William Ping's playful reflection on the brief but intense chokehold that Brad Gushue held over the population in 2006; "what magic spell did Gushue cast to charm everyone I've ever known, even my own parents?" he asks. Other stories, such as Dixit's, expand the collection's geographical boundaries and explore tensions between Newfoundland and elsewhere. Others still refrain entirely from engaging with the province, reminding the reader that fiction made in Newfoundland does not need to be about the

place in which it was written, however fittingly the setting might lend itself to exploration.

Hard Ticket offers a refreshingly broad definition of Newfoundland fiction, one that breathes with life and stays open to change and possibility. As Moore alludes to in her introduction, stories will change and evolve with each new pair of eyes: “And you, the reader, what you bring makes them new again and again” (12). *Hard Ticket* does what only the best collections representing a place can do: upend the reader’s idea of the place again and again, define and then undo the definitions, stay close to the geographical setting (in this case, the island) and then leave, and watch how the image of the place changes when reflected from the outside.

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