

## Melissa Barbeau. The Luminous Sea

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Melissa Barbeau. *The Luminous Sea*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2018. ISBN 9781550817379

Melissa Barbeau's debut novel is as wondrous and captivating as the creature at the centre of the narrative that is pulled from the phosphorescent tides of Damson Bay, NL, by a team of marine biologists. In general, the story focuses on the debate over what to do with this creature, a new discovery that promises to change the lives of those involved. That is, should they succeed in properly gathering as much relevant data as possible before moving their find to St. John's while simultaneously keeping that find a secret from the Damson Bay locals.

The novel — happily — is difficult to categorize by genre. When student Vivienne is collecting marine samples in her boat by the light of a blue moon, she hooks an unnamed fish through the cheek and pulls it aboard in awe. The creature is described in vaguely humanoid terms but is left unlabelled, leaving the reader to fill in the blanks, a pursuit of naming that permeates the text as a whole. As a reader, I found myself likewise striving to categorize the novel. The mysterious natural phenomenon and appearance of an unusual creature led me initially to expect a science fiction novel along the lines of John Wyndham's classics *The Day of the Triffids* or *Trouble with Lichen*, or perhaps something akin to the film *The Shape of Water*. But Barbeau refrains from going full-blown sci-fi, instead blending the fantastical elements of the narrative with rural knowledge and traditions. Following the initial shock of the discovery, the novel draws in elements of the campus novel as it focuses on the interactions among undergraduate Vivienne, graduate researcher Colleen, and their inept supervisor, Dr. Isaiah, in their makeshift laboratory. However, rather than providing us with a portrait of comically tottering academics, Isaiah's professional shortcomings are comingled with a predatory sense of entitlement that encompasses both the creature and the people around him, pushing the plot into unanticipated directions. With my narrative expectations moving in one direction as a consequence of the opening pages, I was repeatedly impressed at Barbeau's ability to seamlessly jump between generic tracks.

Key to the success of the novel is the author's efficient and vivid prose. *The Luminous Sea* is a relatively quick read, buoyed by Barbeau's sharp wit and vivid, inventive imagery that is applied to everything from the creature itself to jams and pickup trucks. My progress through the novel was slowed by my incessant desire to repeatedly re-read passages to soak in the imagery. It might be the cookies poured out of a package "into a higgledy-piggledy pile like a load of wood dumped from the back of a truck waiting to be junked" (93), or an imagined group of invading post-doctoral researchers who are "[a]ll beards they don't know how to groom" (102). When the novel ended, I longed to return to Barbeau's world of words, its humour and its insight.

This insightfulness contributes to the strongest accomplishments of the novel: the characters. Regardless of how much or how little time we spend with these individuals, each is written in such a way as to suggest full, complex lives beyond the text. They lived before the first page, and they continue to live after the last. The narrative focuses primarily on Vivienne and her moral dilemma regarding what to do about the creature as she herself is caught in a transitional stage of life, such that the creature's confinement becomes analogous to her own sense of self. Even more compelling, though, are Tama and Colleen (a restaurateur and researcher, respectively), characters who resist simplification. Tama strives to explore her culinary passions in spite of the conservative palates of the locals while tied to a charismatic and philandering husband. The brusque and acerbic Colleen pursues her scientific ambitions, keenly aware that she has to continually deal with the (not always) quiet misogyny of the sciences in order to succeed. Both women are simultaneously flawed and admirable for very different reasons, fully realized characters. Getting to spend more time with them is a compelling enough reason to keep reading. Like the waters of Damson Bay, Barbeau's characters — especially the women — are luminous.

I can't recommend this novel enough. It feels more accomplished than a first novel has any right to be. Its exploration of naming and belonging is thematically complex, its narrative is captivating, and its prose is vibrant. *The Luminous Sea* is a recognizably Newfoundland

novel that radiates a sense of lived-in authenticity while also transcending it. Barbeau's vision of Newfoundland is refreshingly unsentimental and, as such, bristles with truths that neither pander to nor mock an idealization of rural identities. Like Tama's jams that her patrons consume with both skepticism and enthusiasm, the novel combines unexpected ingredients that make the end result difficult to categorize but altogether satisfying.

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