Sheilagh’s Brush
by Maura Hanrahan

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

_Sheilagh’s Brush_ by St. John’s author, Maura Hanrahan, is set in Rennie’s Bay, Newfoundland, a remote outport fishing village in the Burin Peninsula region in southern Newfoundland. The story covers about six years in the 1930s before and during the Depression, a particularly hard time for local fishermen and their families.

The story is told from several viewpoints. The main characters are a pair of sisters, Sheilagh and Claire. As the story begins, Claire is 17 while Sheilagh is about 19 and married to Peter. Their daughter, Leah Mary, has just been born but neither the roving nurse nor the local medicine woman, Mary, expects the infant to live. Indeed, Sheilagh, too, almost died in childbirth. However, both live, though Leah remains a sickly, fragile child who suffers from frequent asthma attacks. Though Sheilagh is generally satisfied with her isolated life and the poverty and hard work she must endure, she is now extremely fearful of a further pregnancy, and this fear influences her relationships with everyone. Though her life is almost ruled by her overwhelming love for Leah, she determines that she will have no more children and enlists Mary’s help in preventing future pregnancies and her traditional medicine to keep Leah healthy.

Claire, on the other hand, has heard rumours of faraway lands. Though she carries on an occasional clandestine romance with David, she wants more out of life than to be a fisherman’s wife, and usually pushes aside his attentions. The two sisters, though they love each other, cannot accept the other’s choices in life, and clashes result. The conflict increases when Claire becomes pregnant, as well as later, when she decides to leave the isolated community so as to avoid being trapped in the same life as her sister.

The author portrays the harsh realities of life in a remote outport, where access is by boat and weeks-old newspapers bring the only contact with the outside world. The place is so isolated that the villagers sometimes feel forgotten even by the church – though the priest still rules supreme when he does come – as shown in one incident where a young woman is treated in a humiliating way. The day-to-day drudgery and harsh winters, lightened only by the villagers’ attempts to create their own entertainment, are portrayed with honesty and poignancy, heightened by an outbreak of tuberculosis and the deaths of several children and adults. Outport traditions and superstitions are described, many of which will seem strange to readers. For instance, there is the idea that putting an axe under the birthing bed will help remove the pain of labour; and that a woman must stop breastfeeding her baby when it is nine months old because mother’s milk is poisonous after that time. There is the belief that passing a baby between the limbs of a tree will help ward off childhood diseases, and a belief in fairies, which you can try to keep from bothering you by keeping bread crumbs in your pocket.
Hanrahan’s description of the region is sometimes harsh but it includes numerous well-tuned details and comparisons. For example, as winter arrives, the small fishing boats lie upturned and “like onion skin, paint peels off the boats, fluttering away in the cold easterly winds” (99). Later, as the village struggles to fight “the white plague” (i.e., TB), she describes Rennie’s Bay as being “as still as an abandoned robin’s nest” (121).

The book’s title is taken from a Newfoundland legend, of which there are various versions, but which is usually said to refer to the last big storm of winter, somewhere around St. Patrick’s Day. This snow is caused by a final big sweeping of her broom by Sheila (known to various people as the wife, sister or perhaps mother of St. Patrick.)

Maura Hanrahan is the author, co-author or editor of ten books. Those who enjoy this one might like to check out some of her earlier works, such as The Doryman.

Sheilagh’s Brush won an Honourable Distinction award in the 2007 Good Read Novel Competition for unpublished novels. Now published in its final form, it is indeed a “good read.” It was recently awarded a bronze medal in the IPPY Awards (Independent Publisher Book Award).

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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