Hard Ol’ Spot: an anthology of Atlantic Canadian Fiction
Selected by Mike Heffernan, illustrated by Darren Whalen

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

What is darkness but a place absent of light, a cave deep and dank? And in that dark place there are shadows: loneliness, oppression, incomprehension, secrecy and disappointment. We seek the light, though; have need of it for our emotional and mental stability. But the search for illumination, for that match struck to light the way, for the star to guide us, can be exasperatingly difficult. Sometimes, instead of attaining it, we end up further in the hole.

In Hard Ol’ Spot, Mike Heffernan has put together fourteen exemplary short stories gathered from many of Atlantic Canada’s finest authors who take the time to explore this darkness in painstaking detail. They pull each story from their minds and boldly write, sentence by sentence, to reveal the crux of the dark place that frightens us all.

Despite the depressing nature of the stories, I quite enjoyed reading them. They are portrayals of ordinary lives caught in the immediacy of experience. Faced with wretched situations, the characters move slowly, stumbling through their despair, reaching out for guidance. But there are those who do not find the help they need and sink back into the gloom to suffer.

In Steve Vernon’s story, “A Hole Full of Nothing,” the father says: “A man can’t even afford himself a decent drink these days . . . Nothing but lukewarm piss-thin tea, day after goddamn day, you talk about living shit-poor in a damn hard old spot” (49). His statement embodies the central theme of the anthology. The young man and narrator of this piece wants recognition. Not understanding his father’s despair, he turns to his friend, Tommy, who spurs him on to a scheme that results in a demonstration of violence.

Gerald Collins in “Break, Break, Break,” tells the story of a teenaged girl’s break-up on Valentine’s Day. As she tries to deal with her situation, a fierce storm is pummelling
the island. And as the girl, her mother and brother pray for the safe return of their father and husband from the Ocean Ranger, the cruelty of the storm intensifies.

Penny’s life in Elizabeth Blanchard’s “Drive Thru” has been a disappointment thus far. What she longs for is excitement. She does not see it in Chazz – “His back-slap friendliness is too loud, too open; he has none of that dark allure Penny has noticed in other boys, in other men” (14). She becomes intrigued by the stranger called Rick who orders coffee at the drive-thru window. Night after night she is lured by his voice, a glimpse of his arm hanging out the car window, his long dark hair, until finally one night he invites her for a ride. Does she settle for the safe, humdrum world of Chazz, her employer, or does she take that drive? Is Rick the light she wants or is he another darkness she may later regret?

“Hold Out,” another story from Gerald Collins, relates the story of Winnie, sitting in her rocking chair and contemplating her dilemma – she is the last person to resist change in a community that has become work poor. Husband gone, she struggles to hang on to what she knows but, pressured by the townspeople, she realizes she must come to a decision. And what she chooses to do over a tumbler of Bacardi is not as surprising as one would think, but still it is a disturbing decision.

Complementing Heffernan’s selections are Darren Whalen’s paintings. His artwork displays enough light for a glimpse into each dark story. From the picture of laundry hanging on a line, a lit lantern in the foreground from Michael Crummey’s “The Night Watchman,” who would’ve guessed the loneliness and despair hidden behind this image? Or the secrecy behind the painting of spilled blackberries in Sara Tilley’s “Her Adolescence”? And too, the revealing image in the placement of hands in Ramona Dearing’s searing portrayal of a sexual predator in “An Apology.” The placement of hands in the image accompanying Ramona Dearing’s searing portrayal of a sexual predator in “An Apology” is subtly revealing.

These stories come at you like a raw Atlantic wind, pummelling and tearing at your heart; they open a place you’ve forgotten about, or that you want to forget; they make you look at that “hard ol’ spot,” the one you’ve been avoiding all your life. By reading the stories in this anthology, you will recognize the darkness that is in all of us.

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.
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