Road to Thunder Hill
by Connie Barnes Rose

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Road to Thunder Hill is a first novel by Connie Barnes Rose, who lives in Montreal but grew up in Nova Scotia, where this novel is set. Thunder Hill is a fictional small town near the sea, where there are no secrets and everyone knows everyone’s business, sometimes before they know it themselves.

Patricia, known as Trish, is a narrator with an identity problem. She’s a forty-something woman whose husband, Ray, has left her to work in the rock salt mine several hours away, but who returns for some weekends, if they’re not in the middle of a fight, or if he’s not working overtime, or, as Trish imagines, having an affair with some “hot chick.” Their only child, Gayl, aged seventeen, is a typical teen, sometimes rebellious, sometimes loving, and sometimes more grown-up in her behaviour than her mother.

The story includes a number of other well-realized characters who are neighbours: Bear James, a self-proclaimed “failed hippie” and Ray’s closest friend for many years who, Trish is beginning to realize, could become more than a friend if her marriage to Ray ends; Trish’s mother, Bette, who lives in town, and has become a near-alcoholic since the death of her husband, Bernie Kyle, Trish’s father; Alana, Trish’s best friend, an on-again, off-again alcoholic who is a certified psychic, with paying customers when she’s sober or not working; and Olive, who may or may not be Trish’s half-sister, but who seems bent on making Trish feel inferior. Although her parentage is in doubt, Olive has inherited the old Kyle family home and made it liveable once more, something that also bothers Trish, though she doesn’t like to admit it.

The novel is set during a few days in April, when a sudden snowstorm interrupts the beginning of spring, causing power outages and poor driving conditions in rural areas. When a flue fire and lack of power put Trish out of her house, she winds up spending one night stranded in the local bar – sleeping on a pool table with Bear James – and then another couple of days with Olive and her children at the former Kyle house.

Although the present action covers only a few days, a lot of backstory is gradually included by the author. We learn a little about Trish’s childhood, about Trish and Ray’s early attempts at running a communal farm with Bear James, Alana and her husband Danny, and a variety of other hippie-type characters; details about Ray and Trish’s volatile marriage and about her parents’ background, including the mystery as to whether or not Olive actually is her half-sister.

Rose has created an eclectic mix of characters, though they’re not always likable. I found Trish particularly annoying, especially when she drinks or – in her earlier years – smoked marijuana or used other drugs. There were several times when I wanted to shake her and tell her to grow up and act her age. Indeed, her own daughter tells her that at times, accusing her of being an “immature freak.”
Booze plays a fairly prominent role in this book. It’s when she drinks too much that Trish fights with Ray and throws glassware and dishes at him; Ray’s drinking and past drug use have caused the loss of some earlier jobs; and Bette’s drinking is the excuse Gayl uses to leave home and stay with her grandmother, supposedly to keep an eye on her.

This book tells a good story, particularly for those approaching middle-life who, like Trish, expected to know all the answers by that stage of her life, but are only just realizing that answers don’t come with age, that there are still questions and problems to deal with, and that one must make peace with the past, yet deal with the present.

There are a few spots where the story needed more proofreading, but the author assured me that these errors had been corrected in the second run.

Connie Barnes Rose teaches creative writing in Montreal. Her earlier work includes a short-story collection, *Getting Out of Town*, also set in eastern Canada. It was shortlisted for two awards.

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.

Buy *Road to Thunder Hill* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781926708287/connie-rose/road-thunder-hill?blnBKM=1#.T-oE7e2Ql0A