The Cast Stone: a novel of uprising
by Harold Johnson

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

In Harold Johnson’s latest novel the United States has invaded and annexed Canada. Homeland Security’s construction of a high-level security prison is a reminder to any who oppose the new regime. In this dystopian society, the resistance group Native Syndicate resorts to terrorism as a means to make its objections known: “... we have hit targets in Alberta, and recently took a truck of yellowcake... We don’t have to use it. We just have to have it and they know we have it, and they are terrified” (45). The two organizations, rigid in their views, seem irrevocably set and unwilling to reach an accord.

Ben Robe, a political science professor, sees things differently. Recently retired, he has returned to his reserve at Moccasin Lake. But retirement has a few surprises for Ben. Besides meeting old friends such as Rosie, a childhood friend he once rescued from an abusive priest, there is Lester Bigeye recently released from prison where he served time for murder, and Monica, his former lover, who tells him about a son he never knew he had.

Monica invites Ben to a resistance meeting being held at the farm of Abe Friesen to speak about white colonialism and his knowledge of the Treaties. During the rally there is an air strike and Ben is captured and imprisoned in the infamous Dakota Max. He is “interviewed,” a euphemism for torture, on several occasions.

Once released, Ben returns to Moccasin Lake. It seems to be the only place in Canada that works towards harmony. The reserve offers a blending of differences, of tolerance, and this is seen in Ben’s interaction with the elders of the community, in the humorous story of brothers Elroy and Leroy, whose mother “must have been too tired to have much imagination left over when she named the second son” (83).

When Ben meets his son, Benji, and spends time with him, they both discover Doris Lessing and her views on belonging to an organization. Ben remarks: “If you belong to them, then they own you” (298).

And in a way Rosie’s reminiscences of her grandmother, old Jeannie, and her ability to “fly away” are an example of following a path to be close to the earth, to be at one with it, to be close to all held dear: “And the old woman would go to sleep and dream and toss and turn and talk and if she became quiet, her children would pass her shoes over her and she would wake up and tell them how their uncles were doing” (31).

Tolerance is also seen in the principles Ambrose Whitecalf follows, which are to “respect others, take care of your family, don’t interfere” (28-9).

The author understands Ben’s need to be with the land, and this connection is what matters, that any disconnection results in loss to the spirit, to who a person is and who that person can be.

What I liked about this book is the quiet way Ben finds balance in his life. He listens and communicates with nature. When he sees the little brown bird that comes to him at different places
in Moccasin Lake, he understands he is to expect a visitor. The bird is a messenger. Near the end of the book, he recognizes the eagle that follows him when he takes the dogs for a run as Mikisew, wise grandmother, and he thanks her for her presence and for his fortune of living again at Moccasin Lake.

These are the things that matter, not the fear mongering executed by self-imposed authorities.

One of Johnson’s characters who embraces radicalism is Betsy Chance. Unlike her friend, Monica, Betsy is consumed by rage and hate and does not see where her fanaticism is leading her; she ends up isolating herself from friends and family and loses all. She “was going to kill Ben – kill the idea, kill the principle. Then she would come back and kill Monica too – and Abe – just for the fuck of it” (299).

Perhaps the strongest word in the book is waweyatsin, a word Ben learned from his grandmother, and he says it to the people attending the rally: “Waweyatsin. Good for you. This is what happens to you when you act like you’re better than someone. Someone or something will come and put you in your place” (62).

The word is a warning to all who believe in supremacy, who believe in colonialism. ✠

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

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