Adventures in Solitude: What Not to Wear to a Nude Potluck
by Grant Lawrence

Reviewed by Heidi Greco

CBC listeners will know the name Grant Lawrence. He’s that breezy-sounding guy who comes on the radio and talks about music you’ll want to hear. Part of the New Breed the Mother Corp has taken on to pep up its image, he sounds as nice and normal as someone you went to high school with (okay, maybe you went to a different high school than I did).

Before being hired by the CBC, Lawrence was lead singer of the indie band The Smugglers, a group that never officially broke up. But maybe that just means he’s not one to burn any bridges – and heck, you never know when you might want a different gig.

But oh yeah, on to the book.

Although it gets pretty specific dealing with matters alluded to in the subtitle, Adventures in Solitude seems to have little to do with being alone. Aside from the fact that it’s about a place Captain George Vancouver named Desolation Sound, and that the area is still quite isolated, accessible only by boat, Lawrence doesn’t make it sound very desolate, nor does he seem to spend much time there on his own. There’s nearly always someone around – his family, an eccentric hermit, various neighbours, and later on, bunches of friends who come up from the city.

As for adventures, there are oodles, often ones that prove embarrassing to the narrator, as in the nude potluck experience referred to in the subtitle. Some of the adventures are stories about the area’s other inhabitants, characters like the Cougar Lady, known to greet visitors with a rifle in hand. On a slightly quirkier note, there are delicious references to The Adventures of Tintin. These frequently slide in at appropriate spots – what better place to escape to Hergé’s The Black Island than on an unknown shore?

The book begins by looking back on an enviable-sounding childhood, with the author’s dad buying up waterfront property on the aforementioned body of water. In spite of living in such a seemingly idyllic situation, Grant and his family aren’t all that different from the rest of us. As the parents and kids make the long trip towards the dock where they keep their boat, there’s plenty of whining and throwing up in the backseat (was it just because we weren’t strapped in that we threw up so much?). Even if he does have to put up with such hardships as having to visit the property in his dad’s seaplane, or tolerate a mother who insists on wearing pearl earrings to go on holiday in a cabin, the childhood voice rings true. And it’s here that Lawrence charms us into going along for the ride.

Overall, the book is hard to pin down, as it’s a mix of memoir, character sketches, natural lore and camp craft, bulked up with just enough historical tidbits to give it some backbone. But again, it’s probably that very disarrangement that makes the story so approachable – like a rambling conversation with a friend, it goes all over the place.

As if to make it even homier, there are lots of black-and-white images scattered throughout the pages. These appear helter-skelter, and seem to pop out almost like snapshots you might have once used when you grabbed for a handy bookmark. More often than not, the faces squinting out look familiar enough (and sometimes grainy enough) that they could be anybody’s family or friends.

Despite (or perhaps owing to) Lawrence’s rangy style, the book has been nominated for a raft of awards. In spring, it was the only book to make the finalists’ lists for two of the BC Book Prizes. While it only got as far as the shortlist for the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize (for the book
contributing most to the enjoyment and understanding of British Columbia), it won the Bill Duthie Booksellers’ Choice Awards as best book published in BC in 2010. As of this writing, it has just been announced as one of three finalists for a prestigious national honour, the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction.

From a site of throwing up to growing up, the family cabin on Desolation Sound is the pivot of the tales that unfold here. And when the little man who lives in the back of my head hisses in my ear, “Cliche’” or even “Mistake,” I get to where I want to tell him to go away – to leave me alone to sit out on the deck (at least in my mind) and loll away the hours reading a book that takes me away from emails and telephones and too many things to do. As if by burying myself in a book about a place that seems to be from another, perhaps lost time, I might claim a few hours of that elusive and precious state known as solitude. Maybe even have an adventure there. ♦

Like Grant Lawrence, Heidi Greco is a dedicated Tintin fan.

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