

In the Field

by Claire Tacon

Emeryville, ON: Biblioasis, 2011, ISBN 978-1-926845-26-5, 278 pp., \$19.95 paper.

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

In the Field by Claire Tacon is the winner of the sixth annual Metcalf-Rooke Award, a contest that offers a \$1500 cash prize and a publishing contract with Biblioasis for the winning novel or short-story collection. This competition seeks to uphold the tradition of small publishers and independent booksellers in Canada, and is open to new and up-and-coming writers.

In the Field, told in the first person by Ellie Lucan, is the story of a slowly disintegrating marriage, over the period of a summer. Ellie, now aged 39, grew up in rural Nova Scotia along the Bay of Fundy, but she was eager to leave and eventually wound up living in Toronto. She has a doctorate in soil science, and has been teaching at Guelph University, but recently lost her job due to a funding shortfall. She is married to Richard, a prominent researcher and academic, whose family originally came from Trinidad. The couple's biracial children are Stephen, just graduating from grade eight, and Luke, finishing grade one. The marriage is the second for Richard, who is several years older than Ellie.

When Richard announces to the boys, unexpectedly, that Ellie will be teaching the next session, after all, at the University of Toronto, it is obvious that he has pulled some strings to get her the position. Ellie is resentful that he did so without consulting her, and she isn't happy with the introductory courses she would be teaching. There seems to be an underlying jealousy of Richard's success in Ellie, and a sense of her own failure, and she decides not to accept the position.

The couple had been planning a short family holiday in Nova Scotia with Ellie's mother, Lynne, but Ellie – "to clear her head" and to get a break from Toronto and Richard – decides to go earlier. She will take the two boys – though Stephen isn't happy at missing his soccer games – and spend a longer time there. Richard will be busy with a conference in Banff and then with an article that must be written for a deadline.

Ellie is dismayed to find her mother's house in squalor, and her mother having strange spells of forgetfulness. She is also dismayed to find her classmates haven't changed much since their high school days and that they expect Ellie to slip back into being her former self. And she is upset when her children must deal with racial slurs.

The old adage "You can't go home again" seems relevant here.

In the Field is a novel that makes the reader think. A variety of social issues are covered – including inter-racial marriage and its effect on children; aging, dementia and geriatric care, as they affect both the elderly and the "sandwich generation"; and the rural/urban split as exemplified between Toronto and rural Nova Scotia. The reader winds up seeing both sides of each of these issues, and sympathizing, at different times, with the opposing viewpoints. We sympathize with Ellie's resentment against Richard, but we also feel for him later in the story when he learns about Ellie's infidelity. We understand Ellie's worry about her mother but we feel for Lynne with her loss of independence and home. We understand Richard's view of Ellie's former friends as "country hicks," but we also like the way these friends react when Ellie and her mother need their help. The open-ended conclusion to the story also leaves the reader thinking.

Although issues are important, none of them dominates. It is essentially a character-driven story, in which the people must deal with various problems. Ellie, particularly, must decide how to deal with family, career and friends. Eventually she must choose between past and present, and family obligations, to her mother or to herself.

Characters are shown warts and all, but in such a way that we wind up liking, or at least understanding, all of them. For instance, Ellie's father-in-law, Terrence, offers her support and advice, though admitting to his own discretions. Ellie's high school buddy, Bernie, pushes her in directions she'd rather not go, but is supportive in times of crisis.

Claire Tacon was formerly a fiction editor at *PRISM international*. Her short stories have been published in various literary journals, and have been shortlisted for several awards. She is working on her second novel. ♡

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 *In the Field* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781926845265/claire-tacon/field?blnBKM=1>