

Shepherd in Residence

by Elizabeth Creith

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Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Shepherd in Residence is a collection of short vignettes about shepherding in northern Ontario. Many of these stories were written during the 1990s and read by the author on a CBC program called *Richardson's Roundup*, hosted by the well-known commentator Bill Richardson. Richardson had become familiar with her writing through frequent letters from Creith to the CBC, and he suggested she consider a regular gig as CBC's "shepherd in residence." The letters always began "Dear Bill," and finished off with "Till Next Time." However, Creith doesn't use that format in her book, instead writing each memoir as a short chapter forming a separate story, most of them told in approximate chronological order. She has also added a number of unrecorded stories describing her life as a shepherdess in the bush country east of Sault Ste Marie. Told with humour and sympathy, these vignettes will be of interest to many rural readers, as well as city folk who dream of living the country.

Elizabeth Creith became a shepherdess by chance. Raised in the city, educated in fine arts and mediaeval studies, there was no hint that she might become a rural resident whose daily activities were governed by the life and whims of farm animals. The start of such a life came when she found an abandoned drop spindle, which led to an interest in spinning and eventually to raising sheep so that she could be in charge of the entire operation.

Throughout her memoir, Creith inserts interesting facts and ideas. For instance, in one article readers are told that in New Zealand people are outnumbered by sheep by a ratio of fifty to one. In another we learn that the word "alphabet" has its origin in the first two letters of the Greek alphabet – *alpha* and *beta*. Readers also learn details of raising and caring for sheep, including frequent mention of nights interrupted by the need to check on ewes that are about to give birth. We learn about "sheep-to-shawl" contests; about the intricacies of shearing sheep; and the need to protect oneself from a butting ram. Those who are squeamish might want to jump over some of the author's descriptions of lambing; for instance, pulling on a long glove in order to reach inside a ewe to assist her in birthing a lamb. "Even so," she says, "I still think fondly of lambing. Even if it played havoc with my sleep, my social life and my sex life, it was my favourite time of the shepherding year" (77).

There are sad sections in this book, too. The author emphasizes several times that raising animals invariably means that some of them will die. Lambs may be stillborn, or die within a few days of birth; dogs will be run over by a truck; sheep will be killed by wolves and coyotes. Occasionally it is even necessary to put down one of the animals, such as the dog who attacked a neighbour's sheep. There will be frustrating times and amusing times, some being a combination of both, such as the sheep she describes – appropriately named "Horrible Nuisance" – who liked to go through fences, and once wound up perched on a rock face below a hydro dam.

I enjoyed *Shepherd in Residence*. Each chapter is short, complete in itself, perfect for those who like a book that can be picked up and read in small chunks. The author's love for animals clearly shows in her writing.

In addition to this book, Creith has also published a children's picture book, *Erik the Viking Sheep*, and she is currently working on young adult fantasy novels. ❧

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.

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