

Manhattan, Manitoulin

by Bonnie Kogos

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Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Manhattan Manitoulin could perhaps be classified as a coming-of-age novel for middle-aged women. It is the story of a 50ish woman coming to terms with herself and her life as she begins and ends a relationship with a man and with a place. The story begins in the British Virgin Islands, but most of it takes place in two other locations: New York City (the Manhattan of the title) and Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario.

Lily Gardner is a travel agent with 30 years' experience booking yachts and upscale hotels in the Caribbean and elsewhere, who now spends her time teaching other travel agents about options available in the region. She has travelled to 92 countries and 30 Caribbean islands, but she has a stove in her Manhattan apartment that has never been used. She has dated a variety of men but never one that held her interest for long. She is in love with her work and with travelling.

That changes when she meets Willard Knot Mudge, the third on a sailboat on Virgin Gorda. Will is a handsome, divorced 50-year-old from Manitoulin Island who has sold his business and brought his sailboat to the Caribbean for the winter. After spending a short while together, the two go their separate ways but a few weeks later, Will calls to invite her to visit him on Manitoulin. Lily hesitates, and eventually it is Will who comes to visit her and check out the Manhattan boat stores. Although he detests New York, their romance continues with both spending time on Will's boat in the Caribbean. Eventually Lily does go to Manitoulin, and thus begins her love affair not just with Will, but also with his island.

Like all love affairs, this one has wonderful times and rough patches. Lily's first impressions of the island and of Will's house are quite negative. She is a New Yorker through and through and it takes time for her to adjust. While Will is eager to teach her about his island, he seems to want to keep her to himself.

Lily begins to meet more people and starts writing humorous articles about a New Yorker adjusting to rural life, which are published in the regional newspapers. However, her increasing success does not make Will happy; he wants her to be content with *him*. Lily's love affair with the island also has some rough times, such as when she must face a bear trying to come in the kitchen window, and when she falls off the pier while fishing.

I enjoyed this book although, living in a rural area, I found some sections a little annoying. Sometimes, it seemed as if Will was deliberately putting on a countrified persona and Lily's reactions were too much those of an urbanite looking down on country living. Some of the characters are unlikable: Will is self-centred, Lily is confused, and her mother and Uncle Mudge are just plain rude.

I also found a few inconsistencies in the book. For instance, when Lily first meets Will, she is told that he "just got a divorce." Yet, just a few months afterwards, a neighbour tells her that Will had taken a long time to recover from his divorce. Also we are told that one neighbour, Carlotta, has "been after him for years." And on one Manitoulin visit Lily is warned to watch out for the *raccoons* under the front porch, but when she leaves a couple of weeks later, she bids goodbye to the *possum* family.

The author has included some nice descriptions of Manitoulin Island and has seamlessly included a lot of information about the place. For example, we learn about the operation of the swing bridge that gives access to the island's north shore, and the ferry boat by which summer residents and tourists enter from the south. We learn about an interesting church pulpit constructed from the bow of a boat that was wrecked in a storm and then salvaged by the islanders.

I wonder how much of this story is autobiographical. Bonnie Kogos was a former travel agent. She travelled regularly between Manhattan and Manitoulin during the last 20 years, and she also wrote columns for several regional newspapers. Like Lily, she published a collection of articles about Manitoulin. ♡

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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