

The Bottle Collector

by Tom Managhan

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Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

The Bottle Collector is a novel about a sailing journey from Sault Ste. Marie to Thunder Bay and, like most novels in which a journey is taken, this one is also by a quest. Disillusioned with his profession as a psychologist and having been deserted by his wife who chose her career over him, Mark Weathers decides to fulfil a long-cherished desire to sail the Great Lakes like the explorers of old, and he does indeed make discoveries of a kind. *The Bottle Collector* is also a bildungsroman, in which the protagonist learns about himself in the course of the narration. Mark is an entertaining, if at times somewhat cynical, speaker who is minutely observant of details and frequently witty. Moreover, he has a penchant for character sketch and setting up comic situations in which he is not afraid to be seen at a disadvantage.

Early in his voyage, Mark meets a couple at a marina in Georgian Bay. He reacts first to Janis's enthusiasm about his intention to sail the Great Lakes and then to her husband Stan's more judgmental stance:

Stan has made a decision about how the conversation should go. "So, what kind of job allows you to take that amount of time away?" His voice, louder than it has been, has taken on a sneer. He's a self-appointed guardian for the work ethic and he wants everyone to know it.

In an instant, my feeling about him jumps from mild to intense dislike. He's forgetting that not everyone in the world reports to him. Fool. I give him the stare of a boxer coming out to centre ring, and the challenge spreads disquiet over the group. (62)

The psychologist in Mark is apparent as he assesses Stan's domineering way. Nevertheless, Janis remains impressed and lets her feeling be known in her husband's presence. Mark has after all sailed a good distance towards his destination of Thunder Bay, and the word has spread that he has a reputable job at a mental health clinic in Sault Ste. Marie. Mark confesses to the reader that he does not correct this statement to say that he has given up that position.

Rather like Odysseus, Mark has several adventures in the course of his journey. On an island just inside Georgian Bay, he walks from the beach to discover a sign, "Welcome to Cedar Island." Following the path, he comes to a lighthouse. In what amounts to slapstick comedy, he "frisks" the two wooden Canada Geese under the window ledge in search of a door key and is bonked by a window shutter that happens to open just as he lifts his head. After he is treated by Robyn for a mild concussion, he hears her story and about her husband's singular ambition to build a lighthouse for their family home. Although his dream was fulfilled, he has since died from cancer, and Robyn and their dog Sammy are left to live there. Mark reflects on his own relative absence of dreams and on his apparent inability to leave his "mark":

I feel bad for her having lost her husband, for her children having lost their father. But I also feel the life ingrained in this place, in these people connected by generations, the fulfilment

that digs deep into the earth, rises in the sky to overlook north, south, east and west, keeping watch over the generations. The realization hits me more than ever before that I will have contributed nothing towards the future. It won't have mattered that I came and went. The seagulls continue to play. The sun dips in the west. (100–1)

Mark gradually adopts a determined, somewhat existential appreciation for life on its own terms, and much of this change of heart is brought about, at least indirectly, through his love for Beethoven's music (104). He remarks on how Beethoven listened to bird calls and was inspired by nature to compose his works. Nevertheless, Mark considers that Beethoven, given a choice, would rather have retained his hearing over the great achievement of his world-famous symphonies.

Significantly, it is at a Beethoven concert near the beginning of the novel that Mark first glimpses Lena singing in the choir, but it is not until near the end that he encounters her waiting tables at Wolf Cove, and forms a relationship with her. Adding a Red Riding Hood motif to the Odysseus story, Lena's aunt Carmella, as a combination grandmother figure and Circe, gets Mark intoxicated during a cornfest and tells him the unhappy story of Lena's childhood.

The most important figure in the novel is the "bottle collector" of the title. Peter collects empty bottles for the restaurant where Lena works. Mark once had a patient called Ivan who was also a bottle collector, but the difference in how he regards these two men is significant: whereas Mark felt a certain bitterness towards Ivan because he felt had made no difference in his life, he embraces Peter. In fact, in the latter half of the novel we witness him become a more compassionate person. When Mark sets out to leave Wolf Cove during a storm (misreading a rekindling of affection between Lena and her ex-husband), it is the chance occurrence of Peter's being on board that Mark from giving in to suicidal thoughts while managing the boat.

Thankfully, the novel avoids the happily-ever-after of Mark settling down with Lena. Although he does return to Wolf Cove after completing his journey, the ending is left open. Here is a novel that offers first-hand philosophy about how to survive despair and to set immediate, short-term goals. The journey theme and the cluster of motifs are clever, but ultimately it is the lively speaker filtering events and the comic characters he creates that keep the novel moving and alive. ♣

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