

LONELY MONOLOGUE

CARTOON WOODS by Richard Taylor

Reviewed by T.F. Rigelhof
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The bare bones of *Cartoon Woods* are as deceptively lean as its athletic protagonist. While waiting for her young daughter to be collected for a summer holiday by the child's generally absent father, Cora-Ann recalls the central event of her own life: a short stay during her pregnancy in her father's rustic combination cabin, painter's studio and love shack in the Gatineaus in the days after his suicide.

Like Ernest Hemingway, John Malcolm put a shotgun barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger with his toes. Unlike Hemingway, John Malcolm died without artistic success and without the possibility of posthumous glory or even devoted remembrance. Is daughter's recollection of her stay in his cabin is hypnotic with the details of her daily life: Cora-Ann sorts through John Malcolm's personal effects, eats his home preserves, scans his collection of ancient girlie magazines, swims in the river, talks to his neighbours, plants the garden her father intended to plant, builds a scarecrow, reads the letters her father has saved from an old lover, studies his photographs and paintings of other lovers, dresses in his clothes, grieves for the man she never knew, goes a little crazy, gets infected by poison ivy, lands up in the hospital as an observer to another woman's death and regains a deeped sanity.

What has really happened is that Cora-Ann realizes some significant truths about her own condition. She comes to believe "in the dark mysteries. That life can enclose you with secrets and sadness, but the past can swallow your future... I know that looking into the past can either carry you forward in time or it can slowly kill you... We aren't here on earth to make children or money. We are each here to discover the mystery of our own lives.

Richard Taylor is at his best in revealing the mysterious quality inherent in the everyday world in its quietest moments. He is less adept at writing more dramatically of the moments in which one is lost in love

or in fear. It is a risky business these days for any male writer to attempt to portray the world for young woman's eyes. Among other things, he risks accusations of "structural sexism" from some feminist quarters. But Richard Taylor takes that risk for an important reason: he wants to demonstrate the difficulty of thinking sanely in a world too forcibly shaped by the romantic ideals John Malcolm and so many others represent. This is serious, moral fiction.

Cartoon Woods is Taylor's first novel, and while it is too early to tell if he has the determination to create the substantial body of tightly crafted prose that will bring his greatest strength to fruition, it is nonetheless obvious that he has already achieved clarity of vision, sureness of touch and economy of expression.

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