

**February**

By Lisa Moore

House of Anansi Press, 2009

310 pages, \$29.95

I am aspiring, with mixed results, to become two things: a writer and a Newfoundlander. In the meantime I am writing a review of a novel by a Newfoundlander—Lisa Moore's new novel *February* (House of Anansi, June 2009). I cannot say I'll amount to much of either at this rate considering Moore does a better job of reviewing her own book in her book than I could ever hope to (just replace "espresso" with "novel"):

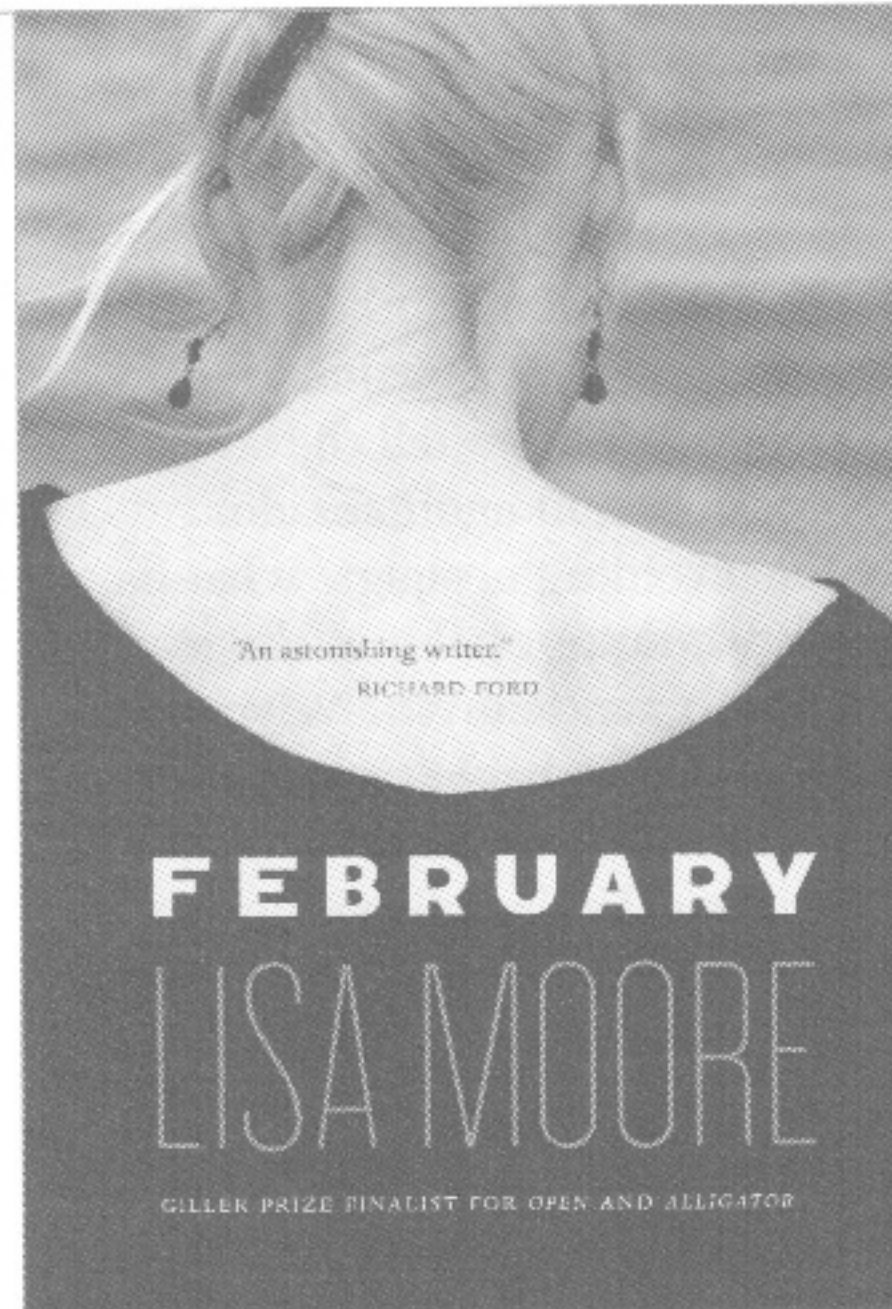
*"The espresso was thick and textured, full of velvety grit."* (p. 41)

*February* by Lisa Moore makes me wish I could write like her. *February*, which follows Helen O'Mara and her family's grappling with loss, memory and moving on after their husband and father Cal dies in the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, is how great prose should be, how it should sound in your head, feel in the pit of your stomach, catch you up short, empty you out and fill you back up:

*Where had the girls been on that day? Cal must have given her a break. A day at the beach long ago, three decades or more and now here was the dresser, her perfume bottle pierced by a streetlight, the brown liquid full of still fire, the fringe of the rug, her housecoat on a hook: Johnny was a grown man. She was clutching the receiver. She was fifty-five; no, fifty-six.* (p. 6)

I'm not surprised to learn that Moore is also a painter, or at least was trained to be at one point. Because *February* is not a piece of writing, it is a work of art. It is wrought with care, crafted with confidence, brilliantly rendered. Like a painting in a gallery that pulls you in, the details are vivid and bold, the brush strokes are sure and true, the whole work is so compelling that you want to climb into it.

I don't have the stomach for a lot of contemporary fiction. I am slower than the Politburo to expand my list of acceptable authors, even though most of them are dead by now. Little that is new moves me. Most of it



leaves me feeling that I couldn't do something similarly competent. But Moore is so far beyond mere competence. *February* reminds us why we bother to read in the first place.

The novel (incidentally only her second; her other publications were volumes of short stories) is written magnificently, but it is also a moving narrative of risk, love, loss, and surviving in a significantly, though not exclusively, Newfoundland context. These broad and profound themes set so firmly in such a place magnifies the thematic effect as well as the contemplation of the significance of the place. Newfoundland through Moore's eyes can illuminate much about the themes she explores, and the exploration as such in turn illuminates much about Newfoundland. Reading Moore's account of the *Ocean Ranger* disaster in *February* shortly after experiencing Newfoundland's response to the tragic March 12<sup>th</sup> helicopter crash (when a helicopter carrying 16 offshore oilrig workers and 2 pilots crashed into the Atlantic 45 minutes east of St. John's; only one of the workers survived) has brought this idea home in a far more resounding way. Bringing this fresh wound to the novel gives the novel an even greater significance than simply being a great book. There emerges a dialogue between the world Moore gives us and the one we live in, which, for the uninitiated newcomer, becomes an articulation of what we are

living through.

Everything of importance I know about the character of the tiny village I am from in Alberta is displayed in times of tragedy and grief, and most of all, on funeral days. That is when we are a community the most. The rest of the days it is hard to tie us together. But, when funerals come, everyone goes to every one. Everyone goes to the Legion. Everyone wears their pressed goin'-to-town-Wrangler jeans and sips coffee and eats little egg salad sandwiches with one bread and butter pickle on top and visits with neighbours they haven't seen in a couple of days. And everyone shakes their heads at the sorrow and injustice of the thing. And then everyone gets in their pickup trucks and goes home to change out of their town clothes and do chores or go back to work. The mourning is together and the mourning is real. Just like the work it takes to make a living from the land or the sea.

I am not sure if everything of importance I can know about the character of Newfoundland I can learn through how the island reacted to the helicopter crash. But I learned an awful lot, and what I learned most of all was how much this island of a few hundred thousand resembles a little prairie village of a few hundred. I read *February* a few weeks after the helicopter crash and through Moore's novel about mourning, rebuilding and living before, during, and the 26 years following (the novel moves with ease back and forth) the 1982 *Ocean Ranger* disaster I came to understand Newfoundland even better. I understood just how much this place is a community like the one I was lucky enough to grow up in. I understood with much more clarity what loss in the community feels like and how hard it comes down on everyone because everyone is invested in this place, in this community. And I understood much better how and why it is so important to go back to work, to go on living, after such devastation. Because this place is harsh and it can reach out and take you away. Living here takes work. Living here takes help. Living here takes an entire community.

- Morgan Murray