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Reviews

**Anne Kathleen McLaughlin, *A Place Called Morning*
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Since 1972 Borealis have styled themselves as a press who “publish new Canadian writers who demonstrate talent and potential for significant growth” and include works by luminaries such as Carol Shields and Guy Vanderhaeghe amongst their backlist. Top marks then, for bravery in the decision to print Anne Kathleen McLaughlin’s *A Place called Morning*. Ms. McLaughlin is a nun who clearly asserts her authorial voice in her main character Kate, stating in the author’s note that “every word I wrote of God, I’ve felt and known and seen” The story follows Kate as she struggles to come to terms with the frequent and crippling loneliness of her vocation. She leaves the safety of her community for a teaching position in Northern Ontario, near Sault Ste. Marie, where she hopes to resolve her ambivalence towards her vocation. She intends to remain anonymous within the community of Silver Maple Springs and does not reveal her status as a nun. She then encounters the local priest, Richard, with whom she falls in love, apparently within minutes of having met him, and realises that she will find it more difficult to resolve her problem in her new community that she had at first anticipated. Richard is in turn in love with another local woman and is struggling to remain faithful to his vow of celibacy.

The first, and by no means only troublesome point about this book is the fact that despite its subject matter, the word “sex” never actually appears in print; any reference to physical love is heavily disguised and romanticised. Euphemisms abound, ranging from the benign “She longed for a love that was all hers” to the ridiculous “He was Arthur, and Kate knew for certain that there was a Holy Grail that he pursued with his whole being.” McLaughlin seems reluctant to really engage with the question of Kate’s sexuality, showing a prudishness that detracts from the one subject that informs much of the novel. Both Kate and Richard seem to be afflicted with random attacks of pulsating, throbbing and heaving of a strictly emotional variety and Kate is regularly overcome by the need for physical passion to the point of collapse only to be rescued by the presence of God who is repeatedly described as enveloping her like an “old comfy blanket”. Both Richard and Kate profess a love for Emily Dickinson’s work but the inclusion of snippets as chapter headings seems stylistically artificial, particularly since each quote seems to bear very little relation to the text that follows it. An unfortunately limited soundtrack that includes, amongst others, “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire” and “Moon River”, frequently accompanies Kate’s romantic musings. The narrative is hampered by this kind of cliché and occasionally the writing is clumsy and immature. McLaughlin conveniently kills off Kate’s love rival in a car crash just in time for Christmas and wraps up the whole episode in a trite and rather sickly manner with the phrase “in some way Kate’s dream came true as she and Richard welcomed in the New Year with wine beside the fire...”

There is, however, despite the often repetitive cycle of Kate’s emotional upheaval much about the book that is both skilful and endearing. There is a narrative within the narrative in the form of a journal written by another nun, Sister Symphorosa, some hundred years previously and which Kate stumbles across in her time of need. The personal experiences that Sister Symphorosa sets down in the journal provide an interesting parallel with Kate’s ongoing dilemma. McLaughlin’s characters are well rounded and interesting and her description of the Ontario landscape is

excellent and convincing without overpowering the narrative thread. She carefully avoids over sentimentalising the characters of the Ojibway grandfather and grandson with whom Kate finds she has an affinity. Given that her central character is a nun and therefore a character that by definition is not expected to be subject to human failing or emotion, McLaughlin has done well to craft an accessible heroine, making Kate both likeable and human. Despite its often-conspicuous repetitiveness, the book is very readable and although her style needs further development, McLaughlin's fiction will provide an eloquent and exceptional perspective in Canadian fiction.