

## Synopsis

*Unidentified man at left of photo* begins in the hazy present in PEI's Charlottetown, christened c-town by its voluble narrator, and looks like it's a novel that'll follow the adventures of Joe, a young man with an inheritance. That conceit is abandoned pretty quickly, and while he appears in the next chapter, and some others, mostly Joe's a comforting continuity figure there for the readers. Uninterested in plot (or too lazy to workshop his manuscript and devise one), the narrator asks readers to supply characters' names from the start, a begging approach that persists through to the end. He even includes ideas people gave him that he didn't bother to work up into set pieces filled with lyricism and tenderness, and at one point resorts to quoting a hodgepodge of Atlantic-Canadian poets in an asylum scene, or something resembling one, that has no apparent connection to anything in the rest of the novel.

Succeeding chapters deal with, if that's not an overstatement of interest: the death of a familiar red-headed little girl, neither the first nor the last (treated in a cavalier manner by the narrator, who you now realize isn't so nice a guide); grocery shopping, because that area feels underrepresented in contemporary Canadian fiction; discussion of the mores of Islanders that's sure to displease them (even though it takes place in good weather and in the spirit of 1968's *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?*); and characters who seem to pop up, like Ed, a friend of Joe (but why?), Ray with his telescope and literary pretensions, and Alan with his tough choice, to stay married to Rebecca or to have an affair with a woman who loves him.

A not too bad chapter is set in a shop with an inventory that includes urban camouflage gear (UrbanWhere?) and locally-written collections of folksy sayings that play off the standard local writer-figure, because cheap shots will help this book sell. It also stocks effigies of city councillors, and Senator Mike Duffy, designed for burning, that are hand-made by a team of ESL

students hand-picked by the owner. Another slice of real c-town life, and boy, won't its citizens be happy.

Friendships barely supply the requisite figures desperate readers may need to warm to; a drinking game in a bar involves fruit; there's a peek into Alan's business world, complete with origami messages left for him by his Christina Ricci-like secretary; and some banter and folderol about a variety of topics too trivial, frankly, to write about here, or maybe anywhere, but there you go. Ed's mother is in a home, but the narrator keeps botching her first name. A different character, Rebecca, who is only ever referred to, gets a chance to burst the bounds of male hierarchy and come forward like a round character dreams of, but that's scuppered; instead, she's shown to the readers in a chapter written solely in questions. As if that's not insulting enough, the narrator veers from her into sociological commentary on c-town and summerside. He does this often, his ambit including nature writing, female drummers, a place called the Experimental Farm, Service Canada, and so on.

Things are more or less amusing, depending on your stomach for ugly. There are cameos of canadian writers and local celebs. Rudeness happens. Beggars are baited, veterans are disrespected, the summer of love turns into the fall of regret, and so on, culminating, if a so-called novel that's about style more than anything (chapters written for the characters to populate; inserted notes from the narrator; photographs; a kitchen sink) can be said to culminate, when a sentient hurricane wipes out most of c-town. Who's left standing? Maybe Joe, and maybe Chevon, a young woman who's into civil disobedience. Generally, there's a lot of talk around rich subjects that a real writer would make a good meal of for admiring critics and prize judges, but the narrator's content to loiter outside the Museum of Important Themes wearing the equivalent of a sandwich board.