



## Jennie's Boy: A Misfit Childhood on an Island of Eccentrics

**Wayne Johnston**

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Wayne Johnston's moving, often funny memoir *Jennie's Boy* concerns his hardscrabble Newfoundland childhood, which was marked by chronic illness.

Although Jenny married Art, "the first educated man she'd ever met," to elevate herself socially, Art was a disappointment. He drank away the rent money, and the couple's five children faced frequent evictions. Indeed, by the time he was seven, Johnston had lived in twenty-three different houses—one of them across the road from his grandmother, Lucy. He also dealt with a variety of undiagnosed maladies. His brothers bullied him, but also hugged him and apologized for their cruel jokes. Due to his weak constitution, he didn't go to school. He spent his days with Lucy, who lost her own son when he was seven; thus, Johnston came to understand that he wasn't expected to survive into adulthood.

Johnston's narration is marked by reason. His voice is plain and direct: "I might have a murmur and a worm," he tells a social worker. Extended quotes, reconstructed from memory, give voice and substance to his family members. He recalls a near drowning while on a fishing trip with his father, who'd left him alone so that he could tipple in secret. He notes that his pregnant mother smoked in his presence in spite of his obvious respiratory ailment. And he remembers that his parents did not trust doctors, even as his mother worried what other people would think about his sickness. When she finally brought Johnston to the doctor, she was shamed, and she did not want to go back. But in spite of such hardships, his family stayed together; their obvious affection for one another and their ingenuity seeps through.

*Jennie's Boy* is a warm memoir that recalls a childhood year filled with difficulties, but also a family's love.

SUZANNE KAMATA (January / February 2023)

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