

The Book of Beasts

Bernice Friesen

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One of life's most perilous journeys is the one taken upon the road of self-discovery. Bernice Friesen has mapped one such voyage with distinction in *The Book of Beasts*.

When an already dysfunctional family suffers a stunning blow, a great tear forms in the already unraveling fabric that binds them. Bernadette leaves her English husband, taking eleven-year-old son James with her, and returns to her Irish homeland. In atonement for her own promiscuous sins, James's mother vows to raise him with great piety, regardless of the hypocrisy. Among this new and strange family, against the harsh backdrop of farm life James must grow from boy to man. This is the story of James: an imaginative, overly sensitive and, during his teenage years, a highly volatile character.

Canadian author Friesen is a visual artist as well as a writer. *Sex, Death and Naked Men*, her book of poetry, was published in 1998. Her first novel, currently nominated for three Saskatchewan Book Awards, is a work in which she wields her propensity for artful language as skillfully as a painter flourishes her brush. In a few short words, Friesen brings a character to life:

She was a gnarled tree with a thin, white thunderstorm of hair. The curl of her dowager's hump was so pronounced, her head seemed to be attached to the front of her throat.

Perhaps too often the story is drawn inward to the deep well of James's introspection; it is a dark and unhappy place that wallows in the dark aspects of a hard life. The moments of joy, though few, are heart-gripping, touching the deepest, safest part of the human soul, filling it with its warmth.

The Book of Beasts is a detailed meandering through a human life, all its angst and growing pains, its confusions and triumphs, hued with the darkness and guilt inherent in the Catholic religion. It's the journey of James's soul and who it will ultimately belong to...his mother, her God, or himself.

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