

Whitetail Shooting Gallery

Annette Lapointe

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Canadian author Annette Lapointe presents a moody, atmospheric portrait of small-town life in *Whitetail Shooting Gallery*. Set on the Saskatchewan prairies, the novel catalogues relationships characterized by discord, violence, and raw, earthy sexuality. Centered on a pair of cousins and their family and neighbors, this frequently disturbing coming-of-age narrative is hardly a feel-good read.

Jenn and Jason are first cousins in the town of Bear Hills, in the Canadian province just north of Montana. Their relationship starts rockily, when Jason moves in with Jenn's family after a traumatic drunk-driving incident. Their familial bond is tinged with a strange sexual tension despite Jenn's affair with her best friend, Donna, and Jason's furtive trysts with another boy on his hockey team. When one day Jenn is shot in the face, it isn't clear if the culprit is Jason or their peculiar neighbor, Gordon, a gay artist whose highly disconcerting sculptures incorporate photos of naked children.

Lapointe, whose previous novel, *Stolen*, was nominated for a Giller Prize, is far more concerned with description, theme, and character development than plot. Indeed, the book's story line is asymmetrical and unpredictable, concluding with a haunting, macabre scene no reader would have anticipated. Throughout, Lapointe explores the complexities of sexual identity, relationships between rural dwellers and animals, and the role of art in society—a heady, challenging mix of thematic preoccupations.

Much of the content is unsettling, but the author's talent for descriptive, evocative prose compels the reader forward. She imbues the sparse landscape of Jenn and Jason's prairie surroundings with an eerie, sad beauty. This forms an effective backdrop for a small-town existence marked with a certain level of underlying despair. As one character, a high school guidance counselor, describes it, teens in agricultural Bear Hills grow up in a "whirl of sex, drugs, slow chemical poisoning from pesticides, incestuous nightmares, seasonal affective disorder-fueled binge drinking and fetal alcohol effect."

In the face of such a bleak outlook, *Whitetail Shooting Gallery* is ultimately concerned with survival. A self-described "redneck jock," Jason sorts through his same-sex attractions to carve out an identity for himself. Jenn rejects the notion of raising a family and needs psych meds to cope with the after-effects of the shooting incident, but she expresses love through a vocation of protecting abandoned animals. For both characters, prospects for happiness may seem limited, but hope is everpresent.

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