

## *Crow Lake: The Growth of Awareness*

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Mary Lawson. *Crow Lake*. Vintage, 2003. \$10.32

*Crow Lake*, the first of three novels centered on contemporary family life by Canadian Mary Lawson, is the engaging story of one family's path forward from tragic death. The narrator, Kate, is seven years old when her parents die together in a car accident on a perfectly beautiful warm day in central Canada not far from home. Left behind are Kate and her three siblings: Luke, 19, Matt, 17, and Bo, a toddler. Through the telling of the next twenty years, the reader becomes familiar with the family, both nuclear and extended, the community and some of its characters, and the physical environment that shapes some of the story. The interplay of family, neighborhood and ecology is a richly textured impetus for thinking about what it means to grow up and to grow wise under difficult circumstances. Systems thinking is demonstrated and stimulated.

The story dwells little on death and grief, but the aftermath of loss consumes almost all of the survivors' available energy. The abruptly orphaned children confront expected and not-so-expected challenges. Writing with a clear-eyed lack of sentimentality and a quiet humor, the author offers a perspective on how people come to terms with sudden and untimely loss. Practical issues are necessarily a focus and provide much of the tension in the family's struggles. However, more important material springs from how the siblings' relationships evolve both within and without the family.

Kate tells the story of her brothers and the way each adapts to the family dilemma from her raw perspective as a frightened seven-year-old, and then later as a young adult. The way leadership is managed and plays out is particularly salient. What happens when an oldest rabble rouser is suddenly a leader by default? How does the younger and more talented son manage his responsibilities to the family at seventeen? How will the integrity of the family be maintained, or will it be maintained at all? What is the role of multigenerational history in the outcome?

As the brothers struggle with family responsibilities, Kate's memories and observations suggest that the story being told is largely hers. She misses nothing when it comes to the survival threats that emerge. She is equally on top of the dangers to family beliefs and goals posed by financial catastrophe. Specifically, how will the promising academic futures of her brothers be fulfilled? This is not an ordinary dilemma, but one much complicated by family history.

The family represents the upward striving branch of an extended family of farmers, whose grandmother's picture hangs on the wall of the home. She is an outsize family personality whose principles and passions have left a large imprint on subsequent generations. As Kate describes the picture, "She looked severe, disapproving, and entirely without humor." (4)

The great grandmother effected a plan to educate her clan of children that was out of the norm for the time and place. The success of her determination puts Kate's father in position to become the most achieving of the next generation of offspring. He graduates at the top of his high school class. The expectation that this achiever's children would excel educationally is unspoken but intensely felt.

Closely held values can cut two ways: encouraging adherence and achievement or discouraging individual goal setting. Or both. How Kate and her brothers navigate these waters reflects processes in the generations before them. The author's embrace of the broader picture fosters an empathy for the quagmires that bedevil Kate and her brothers. Kate shares her thinking:

What took place between Matt and me can't be explained without reference to Great Grandmother. It's only fair that some of the blame should be laid at her door. (3)

The broader picture also includes the remote rural community. The minister, the teacher, the doctor, the shopkeeper and others have supporting roles. People struggle with how to respond to the stranded children. The way each member of the community handles his/her own reactivity in the face of major loss provokes thought about what it means to be a true support. Some members straddle the line between being available and being intrusive better than others. A core group provides some basic help over a long period of time and very much behind the scenes. This provides a window on how natural assistance likely outpaces more formal kinds of help in some situations. It raises questions about the elements of a higher functioning community. What cultural or environmental features might predict optimal community functioning in times of crisis?

The resources of the extended family, and the limits of those, becomes a critical issue for the children. Stepping up to help is the children's Aunt Annie, who comes for a time to get them through the initial period of adjustment. Likely she is a composite of the extended family back in the North Country. Physically strong, practical in mind and not given to emotional displays, she takes the house in hand straight off. She is smart enough to give the children time to get to know her, and she doesn't ask much. She exerts authority but knows when to let the oldest, Luke, take over and try his hand at leadership. Later, she maintains contact from afar with Kate and the others that has meaning over time.

What is the impact of an Aunt Annie during a crisis? What would the family's adjustment have looked like if she had been closer geographically over time? Did the extended family meet their responsibility to the children? Should the children have accepted more help? There are so many varied ways a family might respond to a situation with multiple levels of need. What represents a higher level of differentiation in a response?

When another tragedy percolates in the neighborhood, the way the town responds shows the other side of community. The flawed eye that knows-but-doesn't-know about the apparent trouble in a nearby family has disastrous consequences for Kate's family. Her brother Matt becomes embroiled in the problem, and the outcome is both commonplace and profound. At the same time, Luke has been grappling with his own social dilemma and has chosen a direction. The family lives with the consequences of both boys' decisions, and the consequences are not minor. Systems thinking allows for the age difference of the boys and what it means to be just a little ahead developmentally when the social world beckons in risky ways. It is also worth pondering how level of differentiation might best account for the ability of the still-maturing to think and defer, even in a context of high anxiety.

The rich and brutal environment of rural Canada is an important element of the story. The family has settled in a remote lakeside area, having relocated from the more northern Gaspé Peninsula. Seeking employment as the first white collar member of the family, Kate's dad had come a long way from home but had situated his family in an environment similar to their roots. The environment relentlessly imposes discomfort, whether blazing hot in the summer with black flies to boot, or icy and dark through the long winters. The adaptive challenge of the climate suggests that uncompromising nature has shaped the family's strengths as well as their vulnerabilities. For generations these farmers have eked out an existence against formidable odds. These are tough people. On the other hand, one of their most achieving has been cut down randomly on a county road on a clear and sunny day.

The land surrounding the family's lakeside home influences the family's life. The most important events take place close to water and often at the small ponds nearby. Matt loves the life of the pond and has included his little sister in his trips to sit and observe. He teaches her to appreciate the intricate biology of the insects, frogs, turtle and tadpoles. The reliable cycle of death and renewal stands in contrast to the complexity of the human drama playing out in Kate's family and nearby. Little wonder that she is drawn to the serenity of the ponds and develops a deep love for their time there.

Under the duress of events Kate has become a day dreamy kid whose social interests have been dampened. She focuses on her family, mostly Matt. Loss of parents has fostered a fusion that is well drawn – her reverence for him, idealization, assumptions

and expectations about him and who he should be. It could hardly be any other way, under the circumstances. When Matt's life meets its second calamity in a year, they are both thrown by it. The relationship, which is important to both of them, takes a turn. And as things often go, the years slip by without a real reckoning of the rupture.

The novel jumps forward to Kate as a twenty-something college professor in a major university hundreds of miles from home. She is living out the family's dream of academic success. She has ritualized contact with family and is socially aloof, devoting most of her energy to science and study. She is the good workaholic a distancer can be. She has taken her passion for the pond life to the lab and hopes to contribute solutions to the problem of pollution. She does not picture herself in a personal partnership.

But life has other plans. Kate is drawn to a fellow teacher. She takes him home for a family gathering, much against her normal avoidance of situations that might be emotional. The boyfriend has let her know in a gentle but self-defining way that he wants to know her better.

Kate's reactivity to going home would be familiar to any sentient being who has spent a lifetime carefully protecting self from the emotional mine field of family of origin. Many of the discomforts of collapsing geographic space show up in the days and hours leading up to the arrival home. Distance has worked its function in that our narrator is aware she is uncommonly miserable but does not know why. She focuses on work problems, overreacts to minor issues, wonders if she is coming down with an illness and doesn't sleep well.

The family's gathering, like most such events, offers ample opportunity for reactivity and also for meaningful contact. Lawson seems to understand the way triangles can heighten or defuse intensity. In this case, people who are on the outside of the relationship between Kate and Matt, and who are just "being themselves," speak to the intensity that is left from years of unresolved disappointment. Kate hears other perspectives on the family, none of which is welcome. In fact, experiencing other points of view on her own biases is deeply unsettling. The seduction of distance is calling. What will she do?

Kate knows she is at a threshold, and she addresses her long dead great grandmother: "I have become familiar with books and ideas you never even imagined, and somehow, in the process of acquiring all that knowledge, I have managed to learn nothing at all." (293)

Having an influential ancestor to turn to is fortuitous. Bowen theory has highlighted the ways a triangle can soften reactivity and allow awareness to surface. In this situation awareness is not actively courted but develops in the press of Kate's relating to people

who have become important to her. As in real life, the growth of awareness is a gradual and delicate process. What makes it so hard? Kate wonders about this herself. It is a good question and a worthy study. Certainly, it is an uneven activity. There is never a clear-cut “ending” because there is always more to learn. For some, the process never starts. For others, it goes on for a lifetime.

Of value to systems thinkers is the way this finely drawn portrait of a family maintains fidelity to how systems work. The individual spins within the web of triangles that the generations have woven, subject always to time, place and happenstance. Kate’s story captures the nuances of growing awareness with the fits and starts that accompany the process. By presenting the heroism and foibles of the family and community, the author offers an uncommonly balanced example of what humans are up against in the business of living a responsible life.

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