

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Book review

Consumed by circumstances

Consumption

Kevin Patterson

Random House Canada; 2006

400 pp \$32.95 ISBN 0-679-31437-7

Consumption, the debut novel by physician and award-winning writer Kevin Patterson, begins with the statement “Storms are sex.” The book prominently features both of these phenomena, opening with the former and closing with the latter, within a fascinating set of characters and events in the Canadian Arctic.

Consumption addresses the convergence of northern and southern cultures in Canada and the effects of this interaction. Victoria, an Inuit girl aged 10, is sent from Rankin Inlet to a sanatorium in southern Canada to receive treatment for tuberculosis in 1962. She returns home 6 years later to find a family and community to which she no longer can connect. There, she meets

Rankin Inlet and other communities of Nunavut with the University of Manitoba’s Northern Medical Unit, plainly knows that of which he writes. Descriptions of the people, history and geography of the Arctic are rendered in precise and compelling prose, while the frequent use of medical terminology and Inuktitut phrases wraps sentences tightly around subjects rather than simply adorning the page.

Consumption is a relentlessly moving novel, with skillfully realized characters moving through each other’s lives in scenarios of passion, deceit, tenderness and violence. The hallmark of the book, however, is perhaps Patterson’s aptitude for breathtakingly immersive description, which serves to establish the sheer natural force of the Arctic tundra, not so much a setting as a capricious (and often lethal) character. Patterson adeptly attunes the reader’s senses to winds “slashing with icy ire” under a sky that is “riotously

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and marries John Robertson, a *Kablunauk* (southerner) sent north by the Hudson’s Bay Company to manage the town store. The challenges faced by them, their children and the community during a period of rapid transition in the north constitute this epic novel.

Patterson, a physician serving

purple and orange” with “clouds like steel wool,” while passages speaking to the finer points of hunting and consuming *tuktu* and *muqtuq* (caribou and whale) bring the prose to bear on the olfactory senses.

As much (and as appropriately) as Patterson is romantic with respect to the

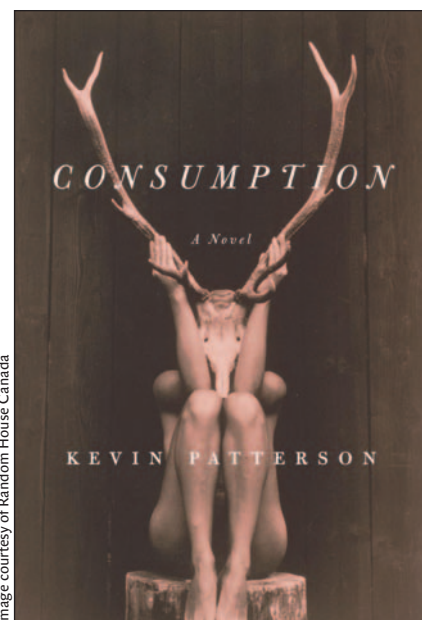


Image courtesy of Random House Canada

setting of his novel, he is keenly incisive and at times cynical with regard to its inhabitants. Wry portrayals of the physicians (“a succession of odd-tempered men drawn by the isolation and potential for ego indulgence”) and police officers (“indoctrinated by American police dramas”) of the community leave the fine marks of a narrator who is passionate but not idealistic about the region and its history.

Not surprisingly, then, the novel is able to explore the complexities of its constituent conflicts without casting opinion upon the players. Throughout the book, marital infidelity, the arrival of a disruptive mining project and medical tragedy at the hands of Keith Balthazar, the kindhearted-if-semicompetent town doctor, are presented in a manner that facilitates deliberation without directing judgment. Thus, on one hand, Patterson

realistically presents difficult questions without offering simple answers. On the other hand, however, this tendency to leave thoughtfully developed problems hanging occasionally results in what reads as hasty efforts to tie them up in the closing acts.

The story of Amanda, Balthazar's teenaged niece, growing up in a southern suburb and contending with the attendant issues of sex, drugs and do-

mestic conflict, is pitch-perfect and a clever counterpoint to the lives of her northern counterparts. However, her character, defined largely through letters to Balthazar, functions as little more than an accessory to the narrative, adding little to what the reader knows of Balthazar and less still to the novel as a whole, which is otherwise remarkably cohesive.

The universal themes of this novel

build magnificently upon the details of its hostile setting. *Consumption* represents the realization of Patterson's formidable talent, and the terrain mapped by this ambitious work will stand as a lasting contribution to the Canadian literary landscape.

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Book review

Finding a sister lost to mental illness

Relative stranger: a life after death

Mary Loudon

Bond Street Books; 2006

335 pp \$32.95 ISBN 0-385-66127-4

This book, by English author Mary Loudon, documents the author's quest to understand her sister, long estranged by schizophrenia.

The main feeling that I experienced as I read Loudon's *Relative Stranger: A Life After Death* was ambivalence. What was curious to me about this feeling was that Eugen Bleuler, who first coined the term "schizophrenia" in 1911, named Ambivalence as one of the four A's of the condition. (The others were flattened Affect, Autism and loosening of Associations.) My ambivalence was about whether to consider this book to be a personal memoir, as the author's means of coming to terms with the life of her sister, or whether the book filled some void in the general literature related to schizophrenia or mental illness.

As I read the text, I also sensed some ambivalence in the author herself. She seemed to struggle with the extent to which she should examine her sister's life and the extent to which she should leave it be. She began her enquiries into the latter years of her sister's life after her sister's death from cancer. Her sister, Catherine Loudon, was a woman

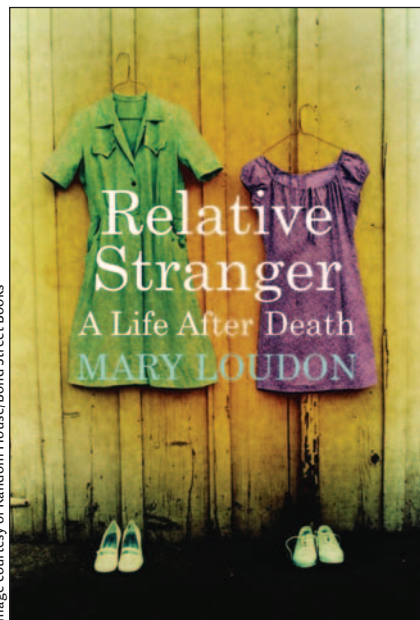


Image courtesy of Random House/Bond Street Books

whose mental illness had cut her off from her family. She had had no meaningful contact with her family for many years at the time of her death. Estrangement often occurs when a family member suffers from a mental illness and schizophrenia in particular. Mary Loudon chronicles with compassion her sister's "disappearance" from her family.

Certainly, for anyone unfamiliar with schizophrenia, the book captures the havoc this illness can wreak in the sufferer's life and relationships. The author documents how, over the years,

family members are rendered helpless in providing assistance and support, while at the same time the sufferer becomes less able to use family support. In the Loudon family, as in other families touched by schizophrenia, relationships are permanently affected because of the impact that disordered thinking has on day-to-day interactions.

In any family memoir, members of a family take a great risk in assisting the author in the story being told. Who wants their actions and those of their family members to be examined and possibly judged by the reader, who is not necessarily sympathetic or empathetic? One of the greatest risks in this story is that taken by Catherine Loudon's father, a physician. He allowed the author to publish a portion of his diary, written to record his attempt to convince his very unwell daughter to return home from India for treatment.

Picture this father travelling alone to an unfamiliar environment, frightened for his child's life, with the task of trying to convince that child to return home with him so that she can receive treatment. He is encouraged by others to force his adult child into returning to England but absolutely refuses to compromise his daughter's dignity despite the heartache it causes him. He returns home alone, more worried than he had been before he saw his child. It takes