**Macdonald’s First Prose is Breathtaking**

*Book review by: P. Dobie*

Open your atlas and let your index finger gently sweep across the Canadian landscape east until you reach water and then go a little further across and up, you’ve arrived: Cape Breton at the northern top of Nova Scotia in a twin in its embryonic stage - New Waterford at the turn of the century. One wonders whether Ann-Marie MacDonald’s novel *Fall on Your Knees* could have been set elsewhere, but the answer floods back with a firm- no. In this story, it doesn’t feel like the characters inhabit the town, but that the town’s growth is innately organic and its DNA is the cast of characters themselves. Yet, with the creation of a life or of lives, comes the possibility of growth off kilter and the bending sideways; it is these permutations that MacDonald explores with fervid interest.

If you plan to read this novel, set aside a good chunk of time, because after page 50 the daily acts of living, eating, answering the phone, and working become irritating intrusions. MacDonald has created a world that couldn’t possibly exist, but it does despite itself and it does with provoking pin pricks and bold stabs. I cared about every single character in this book – both bad and good and each has lived on with me into the New Year. The idea of flat or stock characters has no place in the story.

The author’s success as a playwright *(Good Night Desdemona – Good Morning Juliet)* has given her an acute sense of readers’ engagement. As she commented in a Globe and Mail interview from two weeks ago that a theater audience member leaving the theater can take more than a simple distaste for what is happening on stage, but a reader closing the book happens in a split instance. I guiltily raise my hand in acknowledgment that I close books all the time when I feel fed up, or when I feel with the veneer of realism slipping. That is why I am so amazed by MacDonald’s sense of drama; she holds on to all the plot threats from the very introduction to the final sentence- she makes us sit in our seats by pure enchantment despite the sometimes harsh scenarios. When I did have to leave the book for the stuff of life, I wanted to race back. I wanted to know more, dig deeper, and unravel the secrets.

*Fall On Your Knees* explores a story of family, desire, aspirations, vanity, arrogance and human weakness. We begin at the end "They are all dead now" and we go on to find out who began this saga - James Piper. He is introduced as a young man ready for the world, but as the story unfolds, so do his weaknesses. A pale, Anglo man marries into the dark mystery of a Lebanese girl. Her family has escaped the prejudice and weighty struggles of the 'old country' to welcome the new, but not all of the 'new world' ways are welcomed. This story explores people's outwards motivations about family, relationship, religion and war and she makes the characters turn inwards; MacDonald forces them to confront their own fragile belief systems.

The one belief she explores the most fervently is that of the belief in truth and in memory: "When she gets tired she stops tasting the truth. In a moment of fatigue she wanted everything to be all right, but wishing never made anything right." We meet Frances, our true and tragic protagonist, when she is a small girl imitating her mother's language in the kitchen: "Ya Helwi, Vaaa aa 'yni, te 'berini. But, this time of innocence and belief is brief. The drama that unfolds before her eyes one night will plague her and shape her approach to everything: others, objects, and herself. She was left with the core memory and she spends most of the book trying to reconstruct memory; only it is lodged very deep within her and has become part of her very being. As we follow her struggle, we are drawn inexorably into the lives of others: Mercedes, Lily, Leo, James, even the cat, and finally Kathleen. A diary finally reveals Kathleen's truth which reshapes the events of the entire book; it made me want to reread the story at once. MacDonald forces the reader to take stand on forgiveness and redemption- and I am still enmeshed, trying to decide.

The pace of the novel is quick, but the story is also graced by MacDonald's talent at bringing the rooms, the barren land, and even the food into sharp focus: "...her plushy smell of fresh wet bread and oil, a pot of bezzell and roz with lamb on the stove, the lid buzzing sleepily. Outside, the winter drizzle blurs the window." The vividness of her descriptions makes the psychological exploration palpable.

Just as Materia's dance of the 'dabke’ suggests, "Then you lower your arms towards them, hands still weaving to the music, and you lure the person until they get up and join you because the can't refuse. Then they become the centre." MacDonald draws every character into the centre of the dance in undulating waves and the reader is left without words - only rhythm and the crash of cymbals.