

New Brunswick's *Telegraph-Journal*

Review

Susan Swan explores Ontario's merciless winters, hockey, family, health care, boomtown Petrolia, and the joys and sorrows of being human in *The Western Light*. The quintessential Canadian story revisits Mary Beatrice Bradford in a prequel to *The Wives of Bath*, Swan's best-selling novel published a decade ago.

Madoc's Landing is a fictional small Ontario town on Georgian Bay, but it echoes Swan's hometown of Midland, Ont. Mary leaves home for Toronto's Bath Ladies College in the late 1950s. Having grieved the loss of her mother as a child, and still walking with a limp in her leg from Polio, Mary seeks her father's affections throughout her life. Morley, the local doctor, is preoccupied with his workload, so his daughter is raised by Sal, the housekeeper and inevitably Mary's step-mother, and her Aunt Louise. Mary narrates *The Western Light* from her seasoned vantage point, a period of "time of non-bleeding." Ex-hockey hero John Pilkie, serving time at a new nearby psychiatric hospital for murdering his baby and wife, needs Morley's help and thus begins an unusual friendship with a rather naive Mary.

At the core of the novel, each character struggles with right and wrong and the balances of life. It's a portrait of humanness, suffering the limitations and luxuries of desire, consequence, and history. Swan's elegant diction and structural flow is seamless. This is a novel for all generations.

Shannon Webb-Campbell *for the Telegraph-Journal*