

## FICTION

**A howl of a novel**

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RED DOG, RED DOG

By Patrick Lane

McClelland & Stewart,

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"It didn't take him long to bury me." The speaker here is Alice, a dead child whose ghostly perspective haunts *Red Dog, Red Dog*, and particularly her father and gravedigger, Elmer Stark. From the very first line, the reader is told the past weighs heavily upon the present, and few are asked to shoulder a burden more crippling than the Stark family.

Patrick Lane, one of Canada's foremost poets and a celebrated memoirist, revisits familiar territory in his debut novel. Set in the Okanagan Valley during a fateful few weeks in 1958, the one-time Vernon resident's *Red Dog, Red Dog* tells the story of Tom and Eddy Stark, brothers with a painful past and secrets to keep. Eddy is the firstborn, doted on by his mother and, for this very reason, hated by his father. Neglected Tom is "born to blood and hiding." Alice and Rose, meanwhile, are the "between children," infant girls abandoned by their mother and left to die in spite of the pathetic efforts of their father and brothers. Elmer accuses his wife Lillian of being a prairie Medea, but Alice's posthumous point of view provides us with some perspective. "He said she wanted me dead, but he was wrong. She just didn't want me in the world she wept in."

Much of the early going is spent recounting the family's restless history. Going back generations, the Starks crisscrossed the West with little regard for borders of any sort. Elmer teaches his sons that they come from "a line of people who could not live among others and saw anything not their own as plunder, the things people owned fair to be taken." While Tom believes that there must be limits somewhere, and searches fruitlessly for them, Eddy is truly his father's son.

The story proper begins with Eddy's decision to take his revenge on a local cop for an old wrong. Sergeant Stanley had Eddy sent away to serve a year for petty theft, and did things to him in a holding cell that no one will acknowledge. When he returned, Eddy had "entered a place without a story, for he believed there was nothing that could happen to him more than what already had." Addicted to heroin and past caring, Eddy sets into motion a chain of events that threatens to bring family secrets to the surface and force Tom to account for his own place in the story.

He does so during a climactic set piece that brings the central players together at a dog fight. Going down the generations, dogs (particularly red ones) are about the only thing that arouses a Stark's compassion and provide glimpses of their better nature. The fact that Eddy is well and truly lost is illustrated at the beginning of his downward spiral when he gets back at Stanley by poisoning his German shepherd. But the fact the entire town shows up for the pit fighting is indicative that the Starks, mad and bad as they are, are merely representative. The Okanagan Valley may be sublime - Lane devotes many passages to beauty - but it is also "the land of Cain."

While the relationship between Tom and Eddy is the fulcrum on which this story pivots, their parents are actually the more vividly drawn characters, sympathetic monsters. Elmer Stark flees from his own brutal prairie upbringing, but never runs quite fast enough to escape his demons, primarily his abusive father. "It was the fear in his mother and sister that frightened him the most, what he couldn't accept," Lane writes. "It never occurred to him that by leaving the farm and family it would be his father who would grow in him."

Lillian, meanwhile, waits for the wrong man to arrive. When he does, she devotes the rest of her days to returning misery for misery, clinging to Eddy as her only consolation. Abandoned by her own father, she never had a chance from the moment she stumbled across his body hanging in the barn, "a clapper without a bell, turning slow in the air." Lane's exquisite craftsmanship is on display in such lines, particularly his unerring instinct for images that wound and enlighten in equal measure, bright shards of a broken mirror.

Reading *Red Dog*, *Red Dog* brings to mind the work of another Canadian literary icon. In the story *The Closing Down of Summer*, Alistair MacLeod's narrator reflects on his inability to share his experience with anyone outside a shrinking circle. As a Cape Breton coal miner, he finds himself in the uncanny position of mourning the death of a way of life even as he lives it. MacLeod writes movingly about men who fall back on a sense of shared tradition as their prospects dim.

The key to his story, though, is not its elegiac tone, but the narrator's fierce determination to communicate with distant loved ones, and his realization that literature allows him to do just that. What MacLeod's story teaches us is that while we may not be able to transcend the human condition by becoming transparent to one another, through literature we can at least recognize the universality of our own feelings of loneliness and frustration.

MacLeod's stories help explain us to ourselves and, more important, provide a sense of how cultural identity provides some degree of continuity in the face of the relentless flux of progress. In *Red Dog*, *Red Dog*, Lane works within and against the sort of sprawling family saga identified with MacLeod (*No Great Mischief*) and transforms it utterly by rendering it opaque to its participants. Members of the Stark family are too damaged to trust one another and are thus compelled to keep acting out family dramas they might work through. The only thing passed down from one generation to the next is a legacy of secrets, shame and toxic machismo.

Ultimately, Lane contrasts the keeping of secrets with the telling of stories, the ability to make sense of one's past and, presumably, future. Tom, unlike his brother, yearns for these stories and pesters his father, but is usually rewarded only with curses. Since nothing is shared and no one is in a position to connect the dots, it is left to a spectral narrative presence to pull the threads together for us.

Lane's decision to use a Gothic device such as the beyond-the-grave narrator may strike some as gimmicky, but Alice is absolutely essential to this tale, redeeming what would otherwise be an epic of frustration. She is the repository for everything the Starks are afraid to tell one another and the guardian of all the answers orphaned by unasked questions.

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