

Portrait of the Young Poet

Lynn Coady's new novel charts the progress of a writer who is more Woody Allen than Walt Whitman



THE POET EDNA ST. VINCENT Millay once wrote, "A person who publishes a book willfully appears before the populace with his pants down." Taking the thought a step further, to write poetry and then expose it to the scrutiny of your peers and a renowned poet may be to appear with no clothes at all. That takes a rare degree of bravado, talent or self-delusion. Struggling to know which of those qualities he possesses is Larry Campbell, the neurotic young poet hero of Lynn Coady's very funny new novel, *Mean Boy* (Doubleday Canada; 382 pages), a sharp take on the follies of poets, academia and the small world of Canadian literature in the 1970s.

Larry doubts that great talent can emerge from the kitschy tourist zone on Prince Edward Island where his parents run a Highwayman Motor Hotel, and he leaves the island to attend university. He takes heart in another poet's observation about those tough writing days when the poem grins back while "I chop it like a mean boy." And there are plenty of days when Larry can see a poem in his typewriter grinning back at him, displaying what he imagines as a mixture of embarrassment, pity and superiority: "I may be a terrible poem, it grins, but at least I'm not a terrible poet. At least I'm not the guy who spent two hours in front of a typewriter coming up with the likes of *me*." Larry is angst-ridden, to be sure, but charming in a Woody Allenesque way.

Jim Arsenault holds the promise of salvation for Larry. He is why Larry chose to attend Westcock, a small-town university. Jim is a cutting-edge poet and a star who rejected the "huckster" scene in Toronto for the authenticity of life in rural New Brunswick. Larry can't believe his luck. To be at the same university, to study with Jim, "it's like being able to call Shakespeare up on the phone." If only Jim recognizes some spark of genius in him,

then all doubt will be banished. Larry is not alone in this hope. The poetry students all idolize Jim and are thrilled to hang out with him at his house or in the local bars. They defend him against the traditionalist administration. But the problem with big stars is their gravitational pull. It's hard for anyone in the vicinity to stop orbiting around them and find their own course. And Jim's ego, manic moods and binge drinking start to make



CHRISTY ANN GOULIN

TASTE OF LIFE: Coady's aspiring young characters find that their poetry idol is all too human

him seem more like a black hole than a star.

Coady, who lives in Edmonton, grew up in Cape Breton and writes with authority about life on the East Coast, as she did in her critically acclaimed novels *Strange Heaven* and *Saints of Big Harbour*. In *Mean Boy*, the geek hero's adventures with his mentor and experiments with alcohol, women and new forms of poetic expression (plus his unlikely friendship with a behemoth football player) all provide fodder for comedy. And somewhere in the haze of hangovers, the novel also manages to examine the nature of poetry, poets and the underappreciated fine art of growing up. —By Leigh Anne Williams