

# Words with WINTER

Imagine her delight when Shannon Linden, founder of the Kelowna book club, *Ladies on Literature*, discovered that the award-winning author of the book her club was reading was following LOL on Twitter! Imagine Shannon's excitement when Kathleen Winter, author of *Annabel*, said she loved the LOL blog and would be honoured to chat...

I learned a lot of things from Canadian author, Kathleen Winter. Before the LOL book club began reading her award-nominated novel, *Annabel*, I knew nothing of babies born with ambiguous genitalia.

The story of Wayne, an intersex child's struggle for self, *Annabel* encourages us to open our eyes to what may be hidden; implores us to listen to what's not being said; and gives voice to the question: What is male, what is female? Ultimately, Kathleen Winter's work encourages readers to embrace the answer: It's all a bit of both.

I knew little about coastal Labrador, that "pure land" poised on the edge of Canada's North Atlantic Ocean. The place is so central to the novel and described in terms so poetic and personal, it's as though Croydon Harbor breathes, like a human being, interacting with and shaping the lives of the characters who inhabit the place.

And I certainly didn't know, that Winter, the creator of prose so poetic, it sings, is writing a series of murder mysteries in her spare time. Murder mysteries can be hauntingly beautiful, humming with understated humor (think Agatha Christie) but CSI or maybe Criminal Minds occurs to me. Clearly this is narrow thinking—and

admittedly this is a genre I rarely read. But obviously, I should know better.

Because Kathleen Winter's best lesson is this: everyone, everyplace, everything that graces our space, is created from multifaceted, complexly woven threads of changing colour. We are all exquisitely beautiful, darkly ugly, inherently strong and vulnerably weak, male and female—altogether too mysterious to define.

## A Bit of Winter's Background

Born in Bill Quay, in the north of England, she was raised in Newfoundland and Labrador but now resides in Montreal. Married with two daughters, spinning spells with wonderful words runs in her family—Kathleen is the sister of the successful novelist, Michael Winter.

Ms. Winter holds a bachelor of Journalism and a film studies minor from Carleton University in Ottawa and is currently fulfilling her role as the first Mordecai Richler, Writer-in-Residence, at McGill University, an experience for which she is deeply grateful. Winter writes in her live journal, "At no other time have I been able to walk into an enclosed, protected space away from my own home, and been free to go deeply,

deeply, into the solitude needed for a manuscript to appear. What bliss. What utter privilege and peace."

Fascinating and friendly, open and honest, this gifted novelist got her start as a writer on Sesame Street before working as a columnist for the Telegram in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Her first book, *boYs*, a collection of short stories, was published in 2007. That debut earned her both the Winterset and Metcalf-Rooke awards.

House of Anansi Press published *Annabel* in 2010. Nominated for every major Canadian Literary Award (including the ScotiaBank Giller, Governor General's, and Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize), the book won the Thomas Head Raddall Atlantic Fiction award, was short-listed for the 2011 Orange Prize and is long-listed for the 2012 IMPAC Dublin.

## Getting to Know Kathleen

Acclaimed authors have busy schedules but Kathleen Winter made time for me. Gracious with her compliments and generous with her time, she enlightened this writer—and reader—with many insightful observations.



Kathleen Winter Photo by Aaju Peter

**"Set in 1968 in remote, coastal Labrador, a mysterious child is born: a baby who appears to be neither fully boy nor girl, but both at once."**

-From the back cover of *Annabel*

Kathleen has long been uncomfortable with the notion that we are either male or female, that there is no in between place—or perhaps more accurately, no comfortable meshing of the two that might be considered, even celebrated—as the norm. Having emigrated from England to North America as a young child, she explains, "I have a feeling gender eccentricity and androgyny are or used to be more a part of the fabric of British life, whereas North American culture dictates a more bipolar version of gender." Perhaps this is why the lives of intersex children struck a personal chord with the author. "I felt, instantly, that I knew something about it already," Winter says.

The author favors the character of Treadway, father of Wayne, and the archetypal Labradorean male, more at home with the land than people. A great reader, a gentle, spiritual person, loyal and passionate in his own way, Treadway is honorable but seemingly incapable of expressing the depth of his love for his wife and ultimately, his son. Treadway does surprise the reader (and indeed the author), however, with his ability to grow, his compassion and grace, while Jacinta, mother of Wayne, struggles to remain true to herself. "With Jacinta," Winter explains, "I wanted to explore how being submissive destroys the psyche."

Not respect, but sympathy—a kind of protective feeling for Jacinta—motivated the author while creating this character. "I feel sad that she subjugated herself, her own wisdom about her child."

Winter's work is introspective, quietly questioning, but most of all, actively listening. "I'm interested in science, in physics, and in the power of many

kinds of observation, including what I'd call deep listening," she says. "I try to listen a lot, and to wait, and to see what stories life wants to tell me."

While Winter concedes spirituality often ends up being slotted into "fossilized religion", she says she honours a dimension that defies description, "a deeper vision, largely unknowable to us, at least for now."

So much of the book is profound, there is a temptation to look for the deeper meaning in every nuance, every scene she inserts. I was reminded of high school English Literature, when seventeen-year olds are asked to imagine what some 18th century poet was really saying, when I questioned Kathleen about the significance of Wayne's early obsession with synchronized swimming. Suggesting it was indicative of his love of pattern and his appreciation for rhythm and beauty and ultimately engineering, Kathleen matter-of-factly pointed out that one of her daughters was a synchronized swimmer and that's how she knew the terminology.

Which is not to say Ms. Winter is not fascinated with water. A former competitive swimmer herself, the author claims her team called her, "Chicken Wings."

"I am a Pisces," she says, "And have always loved the element of water, especially once I stopped trying to race in it and began to learn how to free float and simply fool around."

And doesn't that ring of sound advice from this wise woman of words? Perhaps if we relax enough to free float, life's inevitable waves will wash over us, calming us with clarity, rather than drowning us in murky frustration and despair.

Or maybe it's enough if we simply take away from *Annabel*, what Kathleen Winter and her editor agree is the novel's key message, found in chapter 25: "Everywhere Wayne looked there was one or the other, male or female, abandoned by the other. The loneliness of this cracked the street in half. Could the two halves of the street bear to see Wayne walk the fissure and not name him a beast?"

For more of the interview with Kathleen Winter, check out the LOL Blog at shannonlinden.ca

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