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the magic night of the Loneys' one hundred-acre farm. It was lovely in the cold starry night, but we were all glad to be

DURCH OF CHOCOLATE

BOB MENZIES For The Sun Times

■ COLUMN

Stark tale of grief left me spellbound

I'm sure you don't want to hear this from your local book reviewer, but sometimes I doubt my own judgment. Not often, but once in a while. A case in point is Lisa Moore's second novel, *February* (Anansi, \$29.95).

Moore, the St. John's based writer, is the acclaimed author of the novel *Alligator*, a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. It was a work of fiction that I finished without enthusiasm. And here comes *February*, a stark tale of cauterizing grief, one that left me spellbound in admiration.

After finishing the novel, I passed it along to my better half who, after a few days, yawned. "Oh, no!" I argued, "this is a brilliant work, one that will grab up a bunch of pieces on literary prize short lists." "Yawn."

How differently readers respond to a piece of literature. For that is surely what *February* is, a well-conceived work of the imagination. But just maybe, my praise may be based a bit on a personal relationship to Moore's story. On the day after Valentine's in 1942, I was in St. John's Ship Inn enjoying a few pints when the news of the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* stunned the room.

February is the story of Helen O'Mara whose husband, Cal, drowned that dreadful day. "Cal



Andrew Armitage
READ THIS

woke to somebody hammering on his door. Men shouting the rig was going down. She's going down."

Twenty-six years later, Helen is going about her life, still taking it day by day, doing those mundane things that pass away the hours. But constantly, Cal enters her mind, walking on a beach, pulling on a rope in a tug-of-war contest with Helen on the other team, greeting him at the door when he came home off the rig.

And then Helen's son John calls to tell her that he has made a girl pregnant and is lost as what to do. As John struggles with the future path of his life, Helen is nearing a denouement over the loss of her beloved Cal. Which leaves the ending - one that defies the normal conclusion of nearly every book that has won the Giller or Governor General's Award for years.

February is not a novel that will rise up and strike you with its pyrotechnics. Instead, it is far more subtle than that, a skilled interweaving of the tragedy of the *Ocean Ranger* and the men

aboard with Helen who symbolizes the loss of every woman who had a man die that cold, cold night. I'll stick to my guns but would love to hear from anyone else who read and did or did not like *February*.

It's a long jump from Helen's St. John's to Lucy Bloom's Kensington Market but I made it successfully with Lauren Kirshner's *Where We Have to Go* (McClelland & Stewart, \$22.99). Kirshner, a graduate of the University of Toronto's M.A. program in creative writing where she was mentored by Margaret Atwood (who has a new novel coming out this fall), has written her debut novel.

As has been quite common in recent novels, this one is narrated by a precocious child, this time 11-year old Lucy Bloom. Set in Toronto in the 1990s, it is indeed a coming of age story but one that rises considerably above the genre's norm.

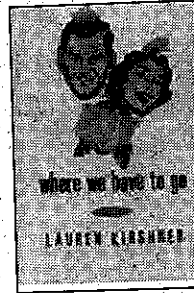
When we first meet Lucy, she is off to school where with great plans to fit in with her peers. Instead, she is ignored, even ridiculed. Not only does she have a father who is a failed glamour photographer, he is also an unsuccessful travel agent who has never been out of the country. And then there is her mother Joyce who, on the surface is bold as brass, a cover-up for a life of

disappointment. Lucy goes into an anorexic tail-spin, one of the best descriptions of wasting away that I have read.

Rescued by Erin who becomes her closet friend, Lucy struggles with thoughts that her father is having an affair with Crashing Wave, a stripper. The bonds of family are tested by misunderstandings as Lucy searches for her place in the world.

Much like *February*, *Where We Have To Go* is a novel about resilience, the human urge to overcome sorrow, trials and tribulations. And much like Lisa Moore, Lauren Kirshner has created a world that is believable, touching and a reminder that the journey through life, while not always pleasant, can always get better with time, growth and understanding.

As I have said before in this column, I don't read French. One of the disappointments of my life (after living in Canada for 40 years, I could have corrected that fault but didn't), that lack of language skill has kept me from reading widely in French-Can-



dian literature.

Luckily, a number of Canada's English language presses have been bringing out translations that, in my ignorance of French, have introduced me to writers such as Monique Proulx. In 2002 I raved about *The Heart is an Involuntary Muscle*, a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Fiction.

Now, I can be equally laudatory over *Wild Lives* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$22.95). The French edition of *Wild Lives* was short-listed for the GG in the French language category. Now, it has been translated into English by David Homel and Fred A. Reed.

Deep in the Laurentians lives a clutch of disparate people. Among them is Lila, a woman whose husbands a dark secret in her life. Lila is also a mushroomer who may or who may not have poisoned a man named Giles with a soup containing the deadly *Amanita virosa*. The theme of fungi runs throughout the novel with some powerful descriptions, especially for those of us who hunt them down.



"Twenty, 35 squeezed into all the interstices of the moss and rock, plump from waiting so long to be discovered, bright yellow like

suns, like gilded kisses, tiny pealing trumpets announcing pure pleasure. Chanterelles." There are other characters who live in this Eden: "Claire, a writer of fictional murder scenes, a child named Jeremy who talks to the dwellers of the forest, vivacious Violette, and Simon, a love hungry man. Moving back and forth between characters and time, this small band must learn to live with each other's secrets and longings.

Monique Proulx has created a magical universe in the forest, peopled by characters with whom the reader will have deep sympathy. And in translation, I did not know that I was reading a novel originally written in French. Now, if only I could compare it to the original - but I can't. So thanks to Douglas and McIntyre in helping me out of my linguistic conundrum.

