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Boys seek solace in absence of mothers

Novel by Quebec author shows way for Newfoundland's francophone writers

BY ROBIN MCGRATH
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The Iguana, Denis Theriault's first novel which garnered a handful of awards when it first appeared as *L'iguane*, is now available in translation. Not every good book can survive the shift from French into English, but this one does.

Despite the exotic title, the work reads as easily as if it had been conceived and executed in English.

Furthermore, it depicts a landscape as familiar as the next bay over, and its voice is the voice we might hope to hear one day when the French communities of Port aux Port produce an indigenous francophone writer of our own.

The Iguana tells the story of two marginalized boys, both orphaned in a way, who reach towards the natural world and one another for comfort and inspiration and a sense of belonging.

The unnamed narrator, about 10 years old, wanders the beaches and shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where he sees and eventually gets to know his counterpart, Luc Bezeau, a dark, odd misfit of 12.

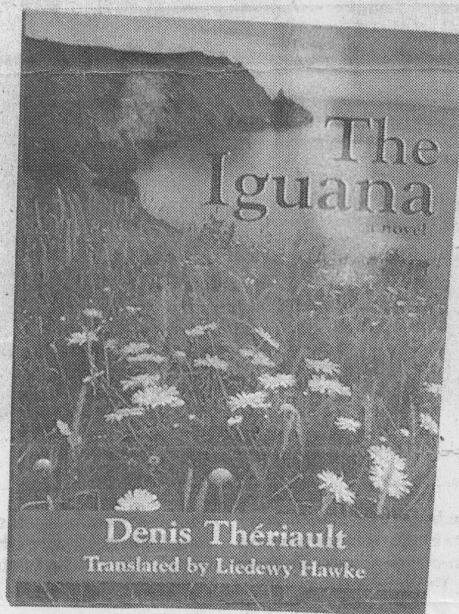
The opening chapter sets the tone: a raucous flock of gulls rises over a flaming, brand new sun, while a beached basking shark begins to stink. This landscape is teeming, constantly changing, full of life and death, order and disorder, everything the great river was for Tom and Huck and more because it is familiar and here, right under our noses and eyes and hands.

The humorous, ironic tone of much of what is essentially a tragic story is well established in the second chapter when the narrator describes the events that have led to his feelings of abandonment.

His papa "suffered from snowmobilitis, a common malady above the fiftieth parallel ... chronic, chronological even, and incurable."

Both the boy's parents loved Ski-Dos and courted, married and probably conceived him on the saddle of their machine. One night, on a cross-country ride in blizzard conditions, they run their Polaris head on into a train. As the book opens, the decapitated father has been buried, the mother is in a permanent coma in a nearby hospital and the boy is being cared for by his maternal grandparents.

Young Luc Bezeau, the focus of much of the book, is similarly orphaned. His mother has committed suicide by swimming into the sea, and his brutal, alcoholic father is in a rage



THE IGUANA
By Denis Theriault
Translated by Liedewy Hawke
\$21.99

against the world in general and his son in particular.

Luc is convinced his mother isn't really dead, and creates an imaginary watery underworld which he explores in his dreams. His only friend is the local priest, whom he assists at mass.

The scenario isn't exactly original — two sorrowful and neglected children find support in one another's friendship.

However, the devil is in the details. The grandparents are loving and kind, the priest is honest and pious, the boys are both clever and bookish, and they have the freedom and the imagination to find a way out of their problems themselves.

Luc is Peter Pan to the narrator's Lost Boy. He sees in the boy's silent, sleeping, beautiful mother his own mother, and creates a plan to wake her up.

Daring dreams

In a cave near the shore, Luc has set up an altar, fashioned around an old stuffed iguana. He uses the iguana to channel his dreams and teaches the narrator to do this also. At first, the narrator is unable to make it work because he rarely sleeps, haunted as he is by dreams of the accident that beheaded his father and sent his mother into a living grave. But bit by bit he begins to have control of the dreams and finally comes up with a way to propitiate the dead man who is holding his mother hostage.

Miraculously, the mother wakes from her coma. Even without knowing that Luc is responsible for her recovery, she welcomes and embraces the boy as a friend of her son.

Finally part of a family, Luc doesn't simply accept this reversal of fate. Instead, he becomes convinced that, with the help of the iguana, he can effect an even greater miracle — the return of his own, real mother.

As the discrepancy between the real, harsh world of Luc's drunken father and the imaginary underwater world of his mother becomes greater, the book veers off farther and father into a surreal, fantasy world of the imagination. However, it almost always stays located in the natural world of the Gulf, with its marine life and intertidal effluvia, and the small, closed society of the humans who inhabit it. It's Anne of Green Gables on acid.

The language of *The Iguana* is a curious mix of the colloquial and the cerebral. There is no attempt to reproduce the actual language of a 10-year-old, and the young narrator sometimes uses words that require the reader to consult a dictionary, but it doesn't jar.

When he describes digging up his father's grave as "piercing the tendon-like membrane of reality and fleeing from the distant aperture," we understand that the voice is describing in retrospect even though it is told as if in the present tense. The sophisticated, ironic voice of the boy is not intended to be realistic, it is merely intended to be convincing, and it is.

If anything, the complex syntax and word choice helps retain the sense that the events in the book are not being described in English. The French accent of the original is conveyed by the fresh, unusual diction rather than through the use of dialect.

In fact, the English, even at its most idiosyncratic, is perfect if one excepts a slight problem with the pluralization of the words Inuit and caplin, which even most native speakers manage to get wrong much of the time.

Newfoundlanders have only recently found their own literary voice in English, so it may be some time before francophone Newfoundlanders catch up. Until that happens, we can look up the Gulf, to writers like Theriault, for a sense of what we have in store.

Robin McGrath is a writer living in Portugal Cove. Her novel, Donovan's Station, was short-listed for best book in the Canada-Caribbean region of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2003.