

FIRST FICTION

Two boys and a lizard

The Iguana

By Denis Theriault
Translated by Liedewy Hawke
Dundurn, 200 pages, \$21.99

REVIEWED BY JIM BARTLEY

Denis Theriault's first novel, *L'iguane*, quickly garnered critical kudos and three Quebec literary prizes following its appearance in 2001. Released now in a first English translation by Liedewy Hawke, it's a tale of two star-crossed boyhood pals struggling to make sense of their shared misfortunes in a seaside town on the Gulf of St Lawrence.

We open with a foreshadowing of watery epiphanies.

"During a deep dive, a euphoric state resembling alcohol intoxication may occur." We're advised that "rapture of the deep" has strictly chemical causes and, indeed, Theriault's unnamed narrator soon emerges as a sensible, empirical opponent to the otherworldly views of the deep that obsess his friend, Luc.

Our young tale-teller sleeps in his grandparents' attic, where each morning he's wakened at seven by a raucous massing of gulls on the rooftop. The early alarm leads him to daily exploration of the beach and the surprises left by the tide.

He's never first on the beach. "There's always that other kid who's ahead of me — Luc Bezeau." Luc gives him wide berth, refusing eye contact. "Is he perhaps too sensitive to the aura of tragedy that emanates from me?"

Recalling the night that his parents' Ski-Doo tangled with a speeding locomotive, our narrator turns his anger heavenward. "Yoo-hoo, up there on your cloud! Did you enjoy yourself, you celestial psychopath?"

His father died instantly, then the cruel joke was extended: His mother still lies in a coma in a hospital bed. "I have lost interest in the job of living. All I'd like to do is sleep" —

but night terrors keep him awake. He becomes "a voluntary insomniac" who spends the wee hours immersed in books.

Luc's desk is next to his at school, but Luc stonewalls all attempts at communication. Friendship begins with Luc's deliverance from a gang of bullies by our narrator's intervention. Luc later leaves a gift on our lad's doorstep, a seashell with a small painted lizard on it. They make a pact to be best pals.

In a remote cave along the basalt ridges of the North Shore, Luc has installed a mystical artist's lair and temple to "The Iguana" of the book's title. On a flat plinth of rock adorned with coloured pebbles sits a stuffed Galapagos lizard. The cave walls and ceiling are swirling with Luc's paintings of sea creatures mythic and real. Here is where Luc hopes to work magic that will awaken his friend's comatose mother.

Luc receives dream transmissions from the iguana, in which he is reborn nightly as a sea creature named Fngl, the result of a chance union between a fisherman and a mermaid.

Fngl, like our narrator and Luc himself, is seeking reunion with his lost mother. Various rituals, including the opening of a grave, appear to pay off in the gradual awakening of the narrator's mother, while Luc's mother remains lost to a presumed suicide. Ultimately, the boys are overcome by briny raptures inspired by Luc's dream visions of an undersea civilization. The Gulf's embrace brings a closing, fatal epiphany.

Theriault's vivid imagery coasts along on its fantastical merits, but the pitch of his imagination increasingly erodes credibility. This initially sensitive and detailed portrayal of childhood pain and boyish love comes very near being swamped by the gale force of its author's creative fancy.

Jim Bartley is The Globe's first-fiction reviewer.