

READER'S GUIDE

No Beautiful Shore by Beverley Stone

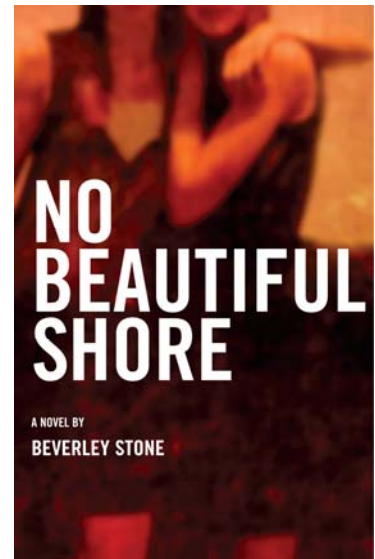


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INTRODUCING *No Beautiful Shore*

Living on an island can be like living in a prison: nowhere to go, nothing to do, and having to see the same lifeless, depressing, go-nowhere relatives and neighbours every day of your life. How can you enjoy life and break the repetitive, soul-draining pattern of becoming a mother, a drunk, or a waste when that is all there is available? There is no answer but escape, and sometimes you'll do just about anything when you're desperate.

These are the fears and circumstances Wanda Stuckless and Bride Marsh have had to deal with for every second of their seventeen years living off the coast of Newfoundland. They don't have to look far to see the trap they'll be stuck in if they stay. Bride, who lost her father to the sea before she was born, lives with her drunk, jobless stepfather and her depressed mother. Wanda must contend with a mother who is in a permanent, self-induced catatonia; a blind, junk-collecting father; and two younger siblings she is expected to raise. Bride and Wanda need to escape by any means necessary, but in the process they find that their island and their home is much harder to leave behind than they could have ever imagined.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Escape

The most important theme, and the driving force of the plot, is the idea of escape. Both Bride and Wanda realize that, to have any kind of meaningful life, they have to leave the island and find their own place in the world. This is something that all teenagers have to deal with at some point in their lives, but it is magnified by the physical and emotional boundaries of the island. For Bride and Wanda, it is not merely an escape from values and rules from home, but a literal physical escape from their world. Emotional escape also plays out through the relationship between Janice and Katie. Through her new emotional and sexual attachment to Katie, Janice discovers that she does not have to live out the life she had prescribed to herself.

Friendship

Every character in the novel is touched by the question of what it means to be a friend. Bride and Wanda have the most pure, romantic idea of friendship, where no one is being used. They stick together because of mutual affection and concern for one another. Bride's friendship with Wayne is close to being untainted, being based on affection and love, yet it remains ambiguous and close-ended because Bride knows that she will leave him in a few short months. Her decision to have sex with him on their weekend away becomes a conciliatory gift, proving her love in spite of her departure. The same can be said about the friendship between Janice and Katie, where, although there is actual affection, Janice discovers that it is not Katie she is interested in, but the idea of escape she represents. The most fraught friendship is between Wanda and Vincent. Wanda accepts Vincent's affection as respite from her loneliness. It is not really mutual affection but desperation, as Vincent is simply using her for whatever he can take.

Home

The theme of home is twinned with the theme of escape and permeates the entire novel. As Bride and Wanda discover, it is almost impossible to define what home is, and even harder to transplant that idea from the physical boundaries that have contained it their entire lives. Home represents family and loved ones, the physical location of a house, a village, an island, a country, and even the idea of comfort and complacency.

Sex

This theme is connected with friendship and the way the characters use sex as a tool to achieve goals or gratify emotions that they cannot verbally communicate to each other. It extends through the theme of escape and home, altering how the characters feel about and interact with these ideas.

Q&A WITH BEVERLEY STONE

1. As a woman who was raised in Newfoundland and then left for Toronto, how much of this novel reflects your own life and experiences?

I definitely share the geography, language and culture with the characters in the book. I left the province in 1988. Many of the people in my high school graduating class left for the mainland, either right away or as soon as they had finished university. That got worse after the fishery collapsed in the early nineties and houses were being abandoned in the outports as families moved away. That is the world that I am writing about here.

The characters, however, could be growing up anywhere, at any time. Bride and Wanda are teenagers who can't wait for their lives to start. In that way, I think that they are like every eighteen-year-old kid who can't wait to leave their parents and their parents' baggage behind, so that they can be different from their mom and dad. Anyone older than about thirty-five knows how naïve that hope is, but it is what pushes most of us out of the nest.

2. How did you contend with writing such vivid, colourful characters against an equally vivid, depressing backdrop?

The characters came to life as I wrote, which happened without much in the way of structural planning, and so many times the characters did things that were completely unanticipated. In some ways, the island itself is a bit of a character. The bleakness of the landscape lets the intensity of the people shine more clearly. But bleak is not depressing. The island is beautiful — it's just not welcoming or accommodating like the farmland of southern Ontario.

I think that landscape is a character in many Canadian novels. Other nations have history. We have geography.

3. What sort of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this novel? Was there a learning curve in writing your first book?

As I had never written any piece of fiction before beginning this story, the learning curve was straight up. However, I did some excellent course work at Ryerson, the University of Toronto, and the writing programs at the Banff Centre that helped me learn the mechanics of writing.

However, the one thing that I think cannot be learned from others is voice. If your voice is true, your story will be true. When you try to imitate someone else, what you write will be derivative and slightly "off" — no matter how technically proficient you are. Based on my limited experiences, I would tell new writers that they should ignore what is popular and admired and just write from their guts, because that is the source of your voice. Trust your voice, but look to others to learn your craft.

4. The dialogue in the novel, especially from Wanda, is genuine and unique for each character. How did you create the dialect that the characters use? Is it culled directly from native Newfoundlanders you know, or was some of it your own invention?

Newfoundlanders are in love with language, which is probably the Irish influence in our culture. We have our own words, and our own sentence structures, and not much hesitation to say what we think – especially the women. No one can give a ‘tongue banging’ like a woman from rural Newfoundland. Every little cove or bay used to have a distinct accent. That was still true when I was a child in the seventies and eighties. I’m not so sure that this is the case anymore. I learned to speak conventional English by watching CBC television. The dialogue in the book is my interpretation of how the world around me sounded when I was a child. Memory can be tricky though, so I won’t claim that it is authentic. Others will have to judge.

5. Wanda is a unique and unforgettable character. What is it that makes her stand out amongst other youthful, depressed literary characters such as Holden Caulfield?

Wanda has nowhere to go but up and no one to get her there except herself. She never questions her ability or the feasibility of her plans and she entirely overestimates her ability to make it, and underestimates the ability of others to stand in her way. Failing is simply not an option. She also thinks that she has nothing to lose. She doesn’t value her formidable strength of character. Wanda is not depressed or scared or confused. She is straining and struggling to get off her leash and make her life happen.

6. Being the more attractive of the two friends, does this make Bride’s life any easier? If so, how does it affect Wanda?

I can’t imagine that beautiful women have easy lives, as everyone wants something from them, and what is wanted doesn’t often run very deep. Bride has her own obstacles – she is bound by all of the choices that her mother has made about her own life. Being physically attractive is mostly a bother to her, as it messes up the straightforward relationships that she wants to have with boys. I get the feeling that Bride just wants them to close their eyes and listen to what she has to say.

Wanda is jealous of Bride, because she thinks Bride’s life is easier than her own. However, she has no bitterness or resentment in her, and she may be the only person who truly loves Bride for all that she is, not just how she looks or what she can provide to others.

7. The relationship between Janice and Katie is a surprise and a release for Janice. How does this change of sexual desire come about for her and is it as sudden as it appears?

Janice falls in love with Katie without considering or even questioning her sexual orientation and without trying to apply labels to herself – it is completely unanticipated. She recognizes that her feelings are about sexual attraction and love-at-first-sight, but she is confused that her love interest is female. She has mostly given up on love, and then fate makes her a gift – one for which she will have to make sacrifices. There is no such thing as a free lunch – especially in love affairs.



ABOUT BEVERLEY

Beverley Stone grew up in outport Newfoundland before moving to Toronto to attend Osgoode Hall Law School. Toronto is where she lives, but Random Island, Newfoundland will always be home. She is a proud alumnus of the Wired Writing Studio at the Banff Centre, Alberta. *No Beautiful Shore* is Beverley’s first novel.

8. Out of all of the characters in the book, who has changed you the most?

I loved Wanda like I could love my own child. She is so fragile, smashable, and vulnerable because no one has ever had her back. She has no advantages and yet she does her absolute best to make a life for herself on her own terms. She is so brave. She makes me want to be brave too.

9. Lynfield is a sweet, tragic character. Where did you get your inspiration for him?

Lynfield's name is one of those odd outpost names, which tend historically to be biblical or otherwise unusual, kind of the way that people in the southern United States have names that are distinctly regional. He started as just a name, and then magically developed into a man who was doing his level best to not deal with the world that he lives in. He is not your typical 'bayman,' but he is a typical coward. He is in denial about what is happening around him – he just doesn't want to see. There are lots of models in every culture for people who are too afraid to see their own life for what it is.

I am a bit concerned that readers might think that these characters are typical or worse, stereotypical, of people from the outposts. To make the book interesting, they all needed to be flawed. To see those flaws as general characteristics of a whole culture would present the hardworking, sober, resilient men and women who have lived there – or live still there – in an unfair manner. My intent was to create complex people who were struggling with the same sorts of issues that people everywhere deal with – family disappointments, economic hardships, friendship, and loss. Change the accent, and perhaps this story could happen in rural India.

10. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

I guess I am trying to say that leaving home is not really possible. All you can really do is change your geographic location, but wherever you go you bring home with you.

Oh, and because this novel can be sad, I want readers to have hope. Sad stuff happens. Everything doesn't work out like you plan. But you always need hope – the kind of blind, driving hope that Wanda has – or else you are just getting up every day and killing time until they hammer the lid on the box.

God, that last bit was grim. Let me try again. What I want to say is that you have to get what you want or die trying.

That's more inspirational. I think.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel is set off the coast of Newfoundland. What kind of symbols and images in the novel are related to the sea?
2. How must Bride and Wanda, and even Janice, contend with identity throughout the novel?
3. *No Beautiful Shore* is a coming-of-age story. How is it similar to or different than other coming-of-age novels?
4. Discuss the role of men in the book. How are they different from, and how do they affect, the main female characters?
5. Wanda is the most insistent on leaving Newfoundland, yet ultimately decides to make the island her final home. How is this consistent with her character yet also consistent with the same imprisoning complacency as the rest of the people on the island?

6. The narrator tells the story in the past tense, reliving the events that take place. What kind of tone does this type of narration set for the novel? Whose perspective is it from?
7. How does the anonymity of the setting affect the message of the novel? Does it change how it would be read if it was set in a specific town?
8. Although she is in love with Wayne, Bride decides it is best for her to leave the island. How does Wayne help her final decision despite her feelings?
9. How is the island like another character in the novel? How are the people who live on the island shaped by its personality?
10. What role does the group of boys play in the novel?