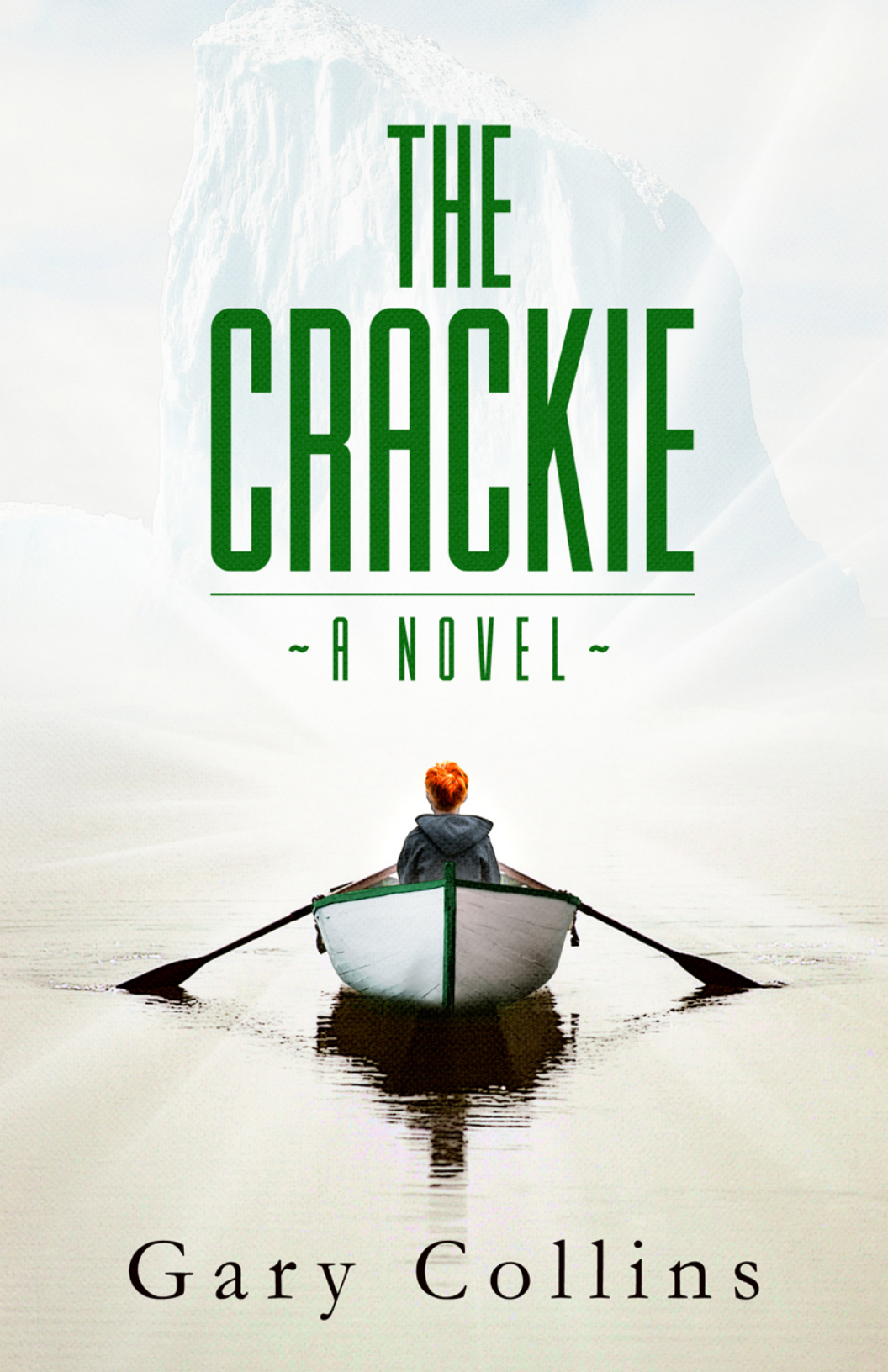


The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a person with red hair, seen from behind, sitting in a small white boat with a green stripe. The person is wearing a dark hoodie and is rowing on a calm body of water. In the distance, a large, jagged iceberg rises from the water under a pale, overcast sky. The title 'THE CRACKIE' is superimposed over the upper half of the image in a large, green, blocky font.

THE CRACKIE

~ A NOVEL ~

Gary Collins

THE CRACKIE

BY GARY COLLINS

THE CRACKIE

THE LAST BEOTHUK

DESPERATION

A TIME THAT WAS

LEFT TO DIE

THE GALE OF 1929

A DAY ON THE RIDGE

MATTIE MITCHELL

WHERE EAGLES LIE FALLEN

SOULIS JOE'S LOST MINE

WHAT COLOUR IS THE OCEAN?

THE LAST FAREWELL

CABOT ISLAND

THE CRACKIE

~ A NOVEL ~

G a r y C o l l i n s

FLANKER PRESS LIMITED
ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Collins, Gary, 1949-, author

The crackie : a novel / Garry Collins.

Issued also in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77117-700-9 (softcover).--ISBN 978-1-77117-701-6

(EPUB).--ISBN 978-1-77117-702-3 (Kindle).--ISBN 978-1-77117-703-0

(PDF)

I. Title.

PS8605.O4647C73 2018

C813'6

C2018-904926-X

C2018-904927-8

© 2018 by Gary Collins

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of the work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems of any part of this book shall be directed to Access Copyright, The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency, 1 Yonge Street, Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5E 1E5. This applies to classroom use as well. For an Access Copyright licence, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll-free to 1-800-893-5777.

PRINTED IN CANADA



This paper has been certified to meet the environmental and social standards of the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and comes from responsibly managed forests, and verified recycled sources.

Cover Design by Graham Blair

FLANKER PRESS LTD.
PO BOX 2522, STATION C
ST. JOHN'S, NL
CANADA

TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Newfoundland
Labrador

We acknowledge the [financial] support of the Government of Canada. *Nous reconnaissons l'appui [financier] du gouvernement du Canada.* We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. *Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.* We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation for our publishing activities.

*For my son, Clint,
who has forded well his own tickle*

And, to say all in a word, everything that belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapor, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion.

— Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*

1

“Jig, you red-headed bastard. Jig!” The man growled expletives out of tobacco-stained lips, his anger directed at the seven-year-old boy seated on the forward thwart of their leaky punt.

“I-I c-can’t, P-pop! M-me hands is sore w-with the wa-wa-waterpups!” young Jake stammered in protest.

The harsh fishing line ran grey and wet through his boil-infested hands as it moved up and down with the rhythm of the sea. Jake’s wrists—where the harsh cloth of his oilskin jumper, too big for him, worn thin and tattered, chafed against his white flesh—were blistered and sore and made him wince with every move he made. The Worcester wool wrapped around each wrist, which was supposed to prevent the dreaded waterpups, was soaked with his blood. The boy’s reply only added to his father’s fury.

Young Jake was seated in the bow, turned sideways with his hands over the gunnels of the small punt, which had only twelve inches of freeboard and moved with each motion of the ageless swells on the Offer Ground. The air was fresh and clean, as clean as the infinite water all around and, save for one hopeful seagull swimming around the punt, was as lifeless as the baited hooks

GARY COLLINS

fishing below. The grey morning sea lifted them up and over mountainous hills and slid them gently down into deep water canyons. Despite the heavy swell, there was little wind. Their island home, grey and bleak across the undulating five miles of sea which separated them, was stolen from view for a long moment before the ocean hills gave it back again.

They were anchored to a killick secured with a long hemp line over the protruding end of the boat's pointed stem and were handlining for codfish in the fishing roads off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. They were not doing well, with only a dozen or so good-sized cod to show for the first hours of the morning's fishing.

"I told you to lance the buggerin' boils, b'y! Use the tip of your trawl hook and squeeze the damn pus out, for Gawd's sake. And stop your damn whinin' and stutterin'," Jake's father cursed, all the while running the wet line up and down through his own fingers, which were wrapped in protective, homemade woollen "nippers" to prevent the chafes and sores from the constant jiggling. Jake wore no nippers on his small fingers.

"The real crackie you are, by Jeezus. The bloody tide runnin' out the bay like a river and we've nothin' yet to show for the marnin's fishin'. The pound boards not covered nor stained. 'Tis jest as well for me to be out in punt be meself. You're one useless son of a bitch, like all redheads. A mongrel, you are. Bloodless and breedless. Make no wonder ya stutters. A bastard, if I could only prove it. The son of a bitch who had a dozen dogs stuck to her, I 'lows. A real crackie."

Jake glared at his father, his hatred blazing from a pair of squinted blue eyes, his soft mouth pinched and saying nothing. He knew what a crackie was. Knew it by rote. Heard it every day, bursting like bile out of his father's thin lips.

Hung from the risings of the punt, just below the gunnels were several large hooks already baited with squid. Hitching his fishing line to a thole-pin, Jake reached for one of the hooks.

THE CRACKIE

The pieces of squid skivvered on the hooks were covered with black, putrid squid juice. The squid had been jigged up in the back cove in the dark of last evening, and with the morning's sun burning their tender, opaque flesh, they were rotting. The boy's reach revealed the extent of the sores on both wrists. Jake winced as the sleeves of the coat, a discard from a much larger person, chafed again at his sores. Pulling the bait from the hook, he was about to throw the piece of squid overboard when his father roared at him again.

"Throw it back in the bait tub, for Chrissake. Do you think we come out here to be feedin' the gawddamn gulls? And hurry up with the lancin'! Your line is dead in the water. You might as well be fishin' with a gawddamn killick. 'Tis squid fer yer supper. You can mark that down."

Jake's father rarely spoke without cursing. The brunt of his abuse, physical as well as verbal, seemed to single out his son, and usually it took in the boy's speech problem and almost always his shock of red hair. Jake was the only one in the village with red hair—both of his parents had hair as black as coal. He was the only redhead anywhere around.

Jake's mother frequently fried squid in the pan with pork fat until it was tasteless and as tough as seal leather, and Jake hated it. Try as he might, when he swallowed the boneless flesh, he could not get past the smell of squid bait fermenting in the punt's bait box—nor the amused smirk on his father's face when, while jigging the squid, the boy was covered with the stinking squid ink which burned his eyes like fire.

Bending over with his back to his father, Jake brought the tip of the hook to his left hand. With his right hand he tried to puncture the raised boil, which was stretched tight and glassy. It was swollen red and extremely tender to the touch. The hook was blunt, and it failed to penetrate the skin. Tears welled up in the boy's eyes when he felt the punt savagely lurch sideways, and he turned in surprise just as his father grabbed him by the

GARY COLLINS

shoulder, yanked the hook from his right hand, and pushed it into the biggest sore on Jake's hand. Yellow pus mixed with pale-coloured blood poured out. The boy screamed. Wrenching away from his father's grip, he jumped into the eyes of the boat, curled up on the narrow cuddy seat, and sobbed while nursing his ruptured hand. The punt rocked back and forth with the commotion.

Jake's father ignored the boy's pain. Seemingly revelling in his son's agony, he roared in what sounded akin to glee: "That's the way 'tis done, you stun son of a bitch! Now let the rest of the waterpups or I'll do it for you, and be quick about it. The wind's blowin' out the bay along with the bloody tide. Pull up your damn line and slip the stem knot so's I can haul in the gawd-damn killick."

With that, he threw the hook, still dripping with blood, toward Jake. The boy grabbed it and bent over, lancing one of the remaining boils and letting out a wail. He pretended to prick the others in the same manner. His father retreated to the stern of the punt, taking the slack killick line with him, and vigorously pulled hand over hand. The homemade wooden anchor filled with rocks came up from the bottom, and he heaved it in over the side of the punt. Jake drew the cuffs of his coat down over his bleeding hands and began hauling in his fishing line just as the punt, released from her hook, turned broadside with the outgoing tide and the stiff morning breeze.

Jake's father took the small mast lying across the thwarts and planted it in a hole bored in the forward section of the punt's keel. Then he hoisted a single sail, which was many times mended, brown and tattered, a lone sheet made fast to the after thole-pin on the starboard side. The punt, heeling to the rising breeze, headed for land and home, which was rising and falling on the horizon. The pain in Jake's hand had subsided, and he was enjoying the sail home when his father started berating him again.

THE CRACKIE

“Get the gawddamn cutthroat, for Chrissake! And haul the puddicks out of the bloody fish! And save the buggerin’ livers, too!”

Jake bent to his appointed task, his head below the gunnels where the stench of the punt’s bilge nauseated him. He said nothing while his father continued his tirade.

“There’s not a buggerin’ cent to be made fishin’, by Gawd. Thanks to you! ’Tis a red line through me name again this year by the bloody merchands, by Gawd. With every ounce of salt for the makin’ of the buggerin’ fish, every dust of mouldy flour, and every stitch of twine along with the hemp which binds ’em, all bound in red upon their gawddamn page. The only thing the bleedin’ merchant doesn’t own is the rocks in the goddamn killick! Miserly bastards, all of ’em.”

Jake ignored him as he flung entrails over the side and threw livers into a filthy pail. His torn fingers burned when they came in contact with the cod-liver oil. Gulls volplaned above and swooped down, crying for the offal before it sank.

They came in on the starboard tack under a high, rugged shore laced with spindrift and were carried by a stiff wind on the punt’s port quarter. Shoals were breaking, and the humped swells broke under the ragged cliffs, upon which the white, tilted stones of their ancestors peered down.

The sheet was let go, and the small sail quivered when the wind spilled out of it. Jake’s father then lowered and furled it around the mast, which he retrieved and laid down once more across the thwarts. He never wound the sail tight as the other fishermen did, and he never kept her tidy, like the others in the place did. It was well-known that Jake’s father’s punt could be identified even in the dark—by the smell of her. They took up the oars slung by the thole-pins, and father and son rowed into the shelter of the cove below the few austere houses and stages growing on stilts which were fastened to the cliffs. They approached one such stage, the punt’s gunnel chafing against the

GARY COLLINS

lower stagehead rungs as it nudged against the wharf. The tide had gone and had taken most of the water out of the cove, and the top of the stagehead was well above them.

“If you hadn’t a been so damn useless, we could’ve got in afore the friggin’ tide turned. The gawddamn tide is always out! Climb up with the damn painter, for Chrissake. Do I have to tell you everything, do every bloody thing for meself? Damn your useless red head!”

The ebb tide made the work of throwing the few fish they had high above their heads harder, and Jake’s old man’s temper flared again.

“Pass down the bloody prong, and not tines first, either,” he blared after the boy as he went scrambling up the stagehead.

Jake soon appeared at the lip of the stagehead, and with the sharp, two-tined prong in hand, he looked down at his father and wondered what would happen if he threw it down tines first.

2

Jake was born on the eve of the twentieth century in a tiny outport on one of the small, isolated islands on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, swelling the community to eighty-eight souls. The new year and era were heralded in by a few explosive gunshots from the fishermen's muzzleloaders. Powder and shot were hard to come by. Jake's father did not partake in the celebrations—neither the new year nor the new birth.

On that dark but starry December night of 1899, a few minutes before twelve, judging by the windup clock on the papered wall of their upstairs bedroom, Jake's mother gave birth to a son whose hair was as red as blood. The plump, pleasant face of the midwife held the only welcoming smile in the room as she cleaned the boy in warm brown water drawn from the island's well before placing the boy, warmly wrapped and uttering his first cries, into Jake's mother's arms. *Tick-tock* was the only sound. The midwife didn't mention to the mother, who was drained of strength and sweating in the cold room, that her son looked many months older than a newborn. Not that it mattered to the mother, for by the time the wailing infant was placed into her arms, the last minutes of the nineteenth

GARY COLLINS

century had flown by. *Tick-tock*. Jake's birthdate was noted as a few minutes past twelve, dating his birth in the new century. *Tick-tock*.

The midwife had cut the cord which bound mother and child, tied a crude knot in the silky rope which would forever protrude a bit from the boy's belly, and lowered the newborn down to the swollen breasts of his mother, where, when he found the nipple of life, he greedily suckled. His mother looked him over, and seeing his shock of red hair, her eyes opened wide for an instant in apparent surprise, but she didn't utter a sound. *Tick-tock*. Then the sweet surcease from the misery of birthing which only women know overwhelmed her. Closing her eyes, she faded away from the pain. Her red-haired son sucked loudly at her left breast, and she winced once without opening her eyes.

A lamp with a short, blackened chimney guttered for light on a chair besides the bed. Apart from the bed itself, it was the only piece of furniture in the room. The glass bottom of the lamp contained only a little oil, causing its light to flicker. Through a rectangular hole no more than six inches long—without a grille—and cut rough in the board floor by a wall below a many-paned window, a wan light issued up from the kitchen directly below. *Tick-tock*, continued the uneven sound.

If anyone were to look out the window, they would see the starshine on the nearby sea, flecked now and then by cresting waves which marched toward the land, clad with night, broaching here and there above the snow-packed surface. Other lights could be seen as well, dull, yellow, and steady in the upstairs windows of other houses. They shone forth upon new snow which had just stopped falling. Woodsmoke rose from a few black metal funnels thrusting upward from snow-covered roofs. The funnels sticking through the roofs of other houses were like small tree stumps reaching out of snowbanks, leaving no trail of smoke.

The harbour itself, tucked behind the point of a tickle between other islands, was calm and still, reflecting the heavens

THE CRACKIE

from its winter waters. It was a beautiful night. The newborn, wrinkled and demanding, wailed. No one looked out the window to watch the night silently blend with the rote of the sea. Jake's birth was lauded only by the ill-tuned clock on the wall. *Tick-tock.*

The years went by hard for young Jake. It was now the year of 1909, and he was a nine-year-old fisherman. The only change in his life was Jake's father's disposition toward his red-headed son, which had worsened. By now Jake's hands were as calloused as the dried tails of the dogfish which were nailed to the stage door. His father used them to hone his knives.

His life was one of never-ending drudgery. Jake's eyes had that unique quality rare among the very young. They looked older and wiser by many years. Jake rarely smiled and usually looked serious, almost to the point of sternness. His stammer had not improved, and the only person in the village he talked to at any length was a girl his own age who worked for a family a few doors down from her own. In service, they called it. Though she could clearly see her own house from the window of her employers, she was rarely permitted to go home. She was an indentured child and was referred to as the Maid. The coin which changed hands between her parents and her employer never crossed the palms of the Maid. There was one other young girl in the village who worked for others, but she was older, all of fourteen.

The Maid's parents' house was different from all the others in the village. It didn't have a second storey, it was always clean and neat-looking, and was encompassed by a low picket fence which stood out from among the others with a thin coat of white paint. Jake saw the Maid every day, lugging the slop bucket out of the house and dumping its greasy contents over the cliff

GARY COLLINS

into the ocean, lugging armloads of firewood into the house, lowering the spread under the clothesline so she could reach high enough to pin the clothes on. The Maid simply draped the heavier clothing over the line. Then she poked the spread almost upright under the bent line, pushing the clothes well above the ground to dry in the wind.

The first time the Maid spoke to Jake was by accident. She was coming from a well with a turn of iron-rich, rust-coloured water, keeping the buckets in each hand away from her body by way of a square wooden water hoop she grasped with her hands. The Maid was walking down the path, in the centre of the hoop, but even with the hoop taking most of the strain, she was still suffering with the load. Her head was bent, and she staggered down the path to the house. Water splashed out of the buckets as she walked, darkening the dust at her feet. Jake was labouring up the same trail with a load of firewood on his left shoulder, and with his own head bent under the load, he saw the hoop too late. The water hoop connected sharply with his left knee, breaking his stride, and it took all of Jake's strength to keep the sticks of firewood from tumbling down upon the Maid, who had lost her balance along with both buckets of water.

"Look what you've made me do!" the Maid cried in dismay. "Now I'll have to go back to the well fer another turn, and she'll bawl at me something fierce for the washin' not done on time. Not to mention the water gully in the porch not filled to her likin'." The spilled water from the buckets ran in small brown rivulets down the narrow path bordered on both sides by trodden grass.

"I-I didn't s-s-see you on the p-path," stammered Jake, still with the load of firewood on his back. He waited for the abuse to come, or teasing about his speech, and deciding it would be to his back and not his face, he turned away. But the Maid did not abuse him. Instead, she said in a voice that was pleasant but

THE CRACKIE

sad and shy, "I had me head down and all. It was my fault, too. I didn't see you, either."

Jake turned around and saw her gathering the empty buckets along with the hoop and preparing to return to the well for water. He threw down his load. The firewood rattled as it met the ground, and for the first time he could ever remember, Jake hurried to help without being told. The Maid, standing with the hoop in her hands, protested Jake's help in vain. He was already headed to the well with buckets in hand, and she hurried after him. Laid across the low wooden box which covered the well opening was a long, slender spruce pole with a small wooden bucket nailed to one end. Gripping the pole, Jake plunged it down into the well, and with a hollow sucking sound from below, followed by the plink of water droplets falling back into the murk, drew it up, filled with water, which he splashed into the Maid's buckets. The Maid placed the hoop over them once more.

"Your name is Jake, isn't it?" When he didn't answer, she added, "I'm the Maid."

"I kn-know," said Jake.

She was about to step into the hoop again, but Jake was one step ahead of her. He grasped the bucket handles outside the hoop's edge and started walking away. So firm and sure was Jake's step that no water sloshed out as he hurried back along the path. The Maid hurried to keep up with him. He passed the fallen firewood and stopped in front of the house where the Maid worked. Lowering the buckets to the ground, he headed back along the path to retrieve the firewood, when the Maid met him again.

"Thank you," the Maid said in passing. It was the first time anyone had ever thanked Jake for anything.

"T-t-'twas n-n-nuttin'," Jake stammered and hurried away.

The Maid was a very pretty girl. She was a bit taller than Jake and had full, soft brown hair that just about covered her round face and small, perky nose. Dominating her face was a pair of

GARY COLLINS

friendly green eyes. Not even the drab grey dress which covered her, nor the equally drab apron she wore over it, could entirely disguise the maturing woman and her blossoming good looks.

The next time Jake and the Maid met—not an accident; not for Jake, anyway—was on the edge of a cliff where she dumped the slops over. If he was asked why he was waiting there above the sea, seated on a low boulder, he would not be able to answer—except maybe to say that the Maid was the only one who didn't make fun of him, and he desperately wanted someone to talk to. The Maid, when she appeared on the ledge, did not ask why Jake was there. She tipped the wooden pail bottom-up and watched as its contents splashed into the sea below. If they made a noise, it was swallowed up by the roar of the waves at the cliff's bottom, and the stain of the contents was hurried away with the cleansing hiss of the spindrift. The wind was up, too strong for the fishermen to go to sea, and Jake had slipped away from the never-ending work doled upon him by his father. A lone seagull, staying aloft with the updraft of wind, swooped down too late to reap any bounty from the discarded human mess thrown from the edge. The Maid had seen Jake as she came up to the edge, and Jake had heard her footsteps and knew it was her without turning from gazing out to sea. Neither of them spoke.

When she had finished dumping the bucket's contents, the Maid stepped back and asked by way of greeting, "Do you like looking out over the ocean?"

The question was not at all what Jake had expected. In truth he had not expected anything, and though he desperately wanted to, he was at a loss as to how to speak to the Maid. No one had ever asked him if he liked what he was doing before, and no one he knew liked looking out over the sea. He considered the question for a long moment, looking at the waves crashing

THE CRACKIE

below their feet, before he answered. Jake wanted to tell her that despite the hard times he spent on the water he really did like it: the wide openness and freedom of it, wondering what it would be like if he just sailed out over the slope of the sea one day and disappeared down over its lip. Just sailed away somewhere and never came back.

But Jake had never experienced progressive thinking aloud before, so what he said to the Maid was, “N-n-never th-thought if I l-liked it or n-n-not b-before. I s-s-spends most of me t-t-time out th-there not l-l-likin’ it.”

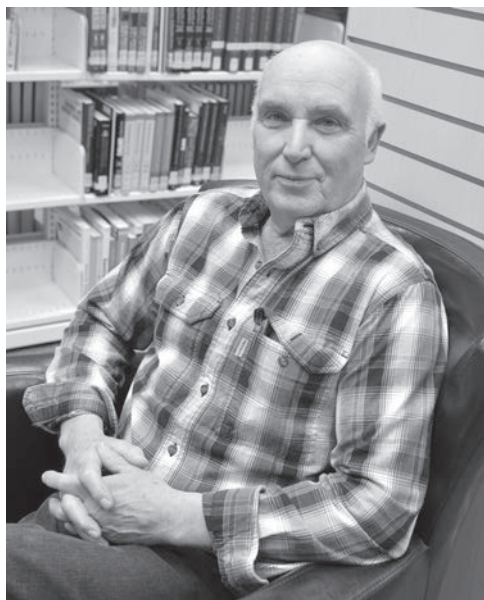
The Maid looked down at Jake for a moment, then settled herself next to him on the boulder. He shuffled aside, making room for her. Neither of them spoke for a time, she looking down at the waves and Jake staring out to sea. She asked Jake if he ever wondered where the waves had come from, ever wondered what they had seen or heard before they spent themselves upon the shore.

“You know, like how far they have come. And how long has it taken them to get here? If they have rolled under ships fully rigged with sails bellowing and lifted them gently as blankets on a clothesline as they passed, or tickled the sides of great whales while they slept, or heard them cry their lonesome cries, felt the puff-pigs and grampuses and the swift squid hounds dive right through them with glee.”

The Maid paused for a minute and then, lost in thought, continued shyly.

“Maybe the fuss they make as they spend themselves on the rocks below is their way of telling us about all the wondrous things they have witnessed.” She suddenly stopped talking and bent her head, as if embarrassed to have spoken her thoughts aloud for the first time to anyone.

Jake looked at her in awe. He had never heard anyone speak like that before. He was not accustomed to being asked his opinion about anything and seldom allowed his imagination its



Gary Collins was born in Hare Bay, Bonavista North. He spent forty years in the logging and sawmilling business with his father, Theophilus, and son Clint. Gary was once Newfoundland's youngest fisheries guardian. He managed log drives down spring rivers for years, spent seven seasons driving tractor-trailers over ice roads and the Beaufort Sea of Canada's Western Arctic, and has been involved in the crab, lobster, and cod commercial fisheries. In 2016, he joined the Canadian Rangers.

Gary's writing career began when he was asked to write eulogies for deceased friends and family. Now a critically acclaimed author, he has written thirteen books, including the children's illustrated book *What Colour is the Ocean?*, which he co-wrote with his granddaughter, Maggie Rose Parsons. That book won an Atlantic Book Award: The Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration. His book *Mattie Mitchell: Newfoundland's Greatest Frontiersman* has been adapted for film. His first novel, *The Last Beothuk*, won the inaugural NL Reads literary competition, administered by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Gary Collins is Newfoundland and Labrador's favourite storyteller, and today he is known all over the province as the Story Man. His favourite pastimes are reading, writing, and playing guitar at his log cabin. He lives in Hare Bay, Newfoundland, with his wife, the former Rose Gill. They have three children and three grandchildren.

Visit Flanker Press at:

[www. ankerpress.com](http://www.ankerpress.com)

[https://www.facebook.com/ ankerpress](https://www.facebook.com/ankerpress)

<https://twitter.com/FlankerPress>

<http://www.youtube.com/user/FlankerPress>