

# A Flock of Swans

By Peter Wolfe

Book Review:

*Devotion*, by Howard Norman. Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

*Devotion* rings true from the opening bell. But don't be fooled by its geographical sweep. Though the book extends from the Czech Republic to western Canada, it's a tight work of domestic realism. Driving its plot is Chekhov's belief that "certain turbulences and vicissitudes" can shred all erotic ties. Even the family, usually a stronghold of love and security, can deteriorate into a butcher's shop.

Danger knives out early. The book opens where most novels end—with a marriage. Photographer, writer, and teacher David Kozol and Margaret Field have finished honeymooning, and Maggie, publicity director of the Dalhousie Ensemble, just left David at their London hotel to follow her musicians to Amsterdam.

Turbulence soon disrupts the young marriage. The book's first paragraph explains that a fight between David and his father-in-law the morning after the honeymoon pitched William Field into the path of a London taxi that nearly killed him.

Why this untimely fury? Coinciding with Maggie's departure from London was the arrival there of David's Czech translator and ex-paramour. David had mailed Katrine Novak the news of his upcoming marriage. Riled by the supposed cowardice of his farewell letter, Katrine came straight to his London hotel from Prague to have her say.

David's acceptance of her dinner invitation keeps cowardice to the fore. He broke faith with Maggie by dining with Katrine. More cowardly, deceitful, and stupid was his inviting her to his hotel room for after-dinner coffee and brandy. "Small things tend to big damages," he notes when William comes to his room the next

morning to make a delivery and finds himself greeted by Katrine. No, David didn't have sex with her the previous night, but they did sleep in the same room after passing out from drink.

The balance of the book probes the aftershocks of his blunder. It also weighs the costs of the blunder, not only to David but to an unforgiving Maggie, as well. Light on their crisis soon comes forth. While honeymooning, Maggie and David saw a woman drive past them with a swan in the back seat of her car. The woman, they were told, believes that the swan is her reincarnated husband. Mrs. Campbell's devotion to her husband's memory runs so strong that she recreated him in the swan she had nursed back to health after finding him injured on her property.

Does this supposed madness make divine sense? It certainly fought greater odds than the "skewed love" that both divides and joins Maggie and David. But perhaps taking their hint from Mrs. Campbell and her swan, the distraught couple is last seen holding hands in the back seat of a car that's speeding to the hospital where their daughter will be born.

Norman forges links between the two bonds by putting swans on view during many of the book's major developments. An 11-year-old David was photographing a swan when he accidentally saw, and then snapped, his father smooching a woman on a park bench. Swans are also floating on the pond that Maggie rises from to announce that she has gone into labor.

The 19 swans that occupy the pond adjoining the Nova Scotia property that William Field manages are both ghostly and solid. Though beautiful, graceful, and placid, they can also turn nasty and aggressive. Said to mate for life, as well, they pose a moral standard that shames the adulterous fathers of David and Maggie (William had nearly lost his marriage years before the book's present-tense action to an intrigue with a Halifax woman).

The swans also burlesque David's London misadventure, which, though not strictly adulterous, might have been, for all the damage it caused. During a drunken spree, David leads the swans to the guesthouse adjoining their pond, which they foul, just as he fouled

his marriage to the guesthouse's caretaker's daughter.

Like the enigmatic swans, the book that features them is both simple and mysterious. For instance, the nonchalance of its first sentence, "Here's what happened," holds steady throughout. This consistency reaps gains. The offhand narrating voice of *Devotion* clashes admirably with the violence, the emotional stress, and the dark primitive motives vexing the people.

It also reminds us that the musical group Maggie works for specializes in masters of polyphony, like Bach and Haydn. Like a fugue played by the Dalhousie Ensemble, motifs in *Devotion* reflect, graze, and counterpoint each other. David becomes both William's caretaker and does his caretaker's job after William's mishap in London. Then the men reverse roles after William's retributive haymaker breaks William's jaw and lands him in the hospital.

Nor is it a fluke that William speaks of nursing David back to health, a phrase used to describe Mrs. Campbell's tending of the swan she replaced her husband with. Motifs work at different narrative levels in *Devotion*, a device that reminds us that William and David spend more time on the page together than either man does with Maggie.

Doubts about David's constancy might have sent William to his London hotel room. Then, both his convalescence and David's help him study his new son-in-law, set him some challenges, and, yes, build some compassion for his fellow flawed husband. Whatever chances David and Maggie have at book's end to make it as a couple owe a great deal to William.

You'll owe yourselves a haymaker to the chops if you don't grab a copy of *Devotion*. Rarely has such a short novel touched on so many truths or probed such operatic depths. Howard Norman has written in *Devotion* a lights-out masterpiece that will vault him to the ranks of North America's leading novelists.