



The Cartographer of No Man's Land

P.S. Duffy

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From a village in Nova Scotia to the trenches of France, P. S. Duffy's astonishing debut showcases a rare talent emerging in midlife.

When his beloved brother-in-law goes missing at the front in 1916, Angus defies his pacifist upbringing to join the war and find him. Assured a position as a cartographer in London, he is instead sent directly into battle. Meanwhile, at home, his son Simon Peter must navigate escalating hostility in a town torn by grief. Selected as both a Barnes Noble Discover pick and one of the American Bookseller Association's Debut Dozen, *The Cartographer of No Man's Land* offers a soulful portrayal of World War I and the lives that were forever changed by it, both on the battlefield and at home.

The Cartographer of No Man's Land Details

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Author : P.S. Duffy

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From Reader Review The Cartographer of No Man's Land for online ebook

Heather says

Gorgeous writing with well-crafted, evocative sentences that I would often re-read just to savor them. The Nova Scotia & France storylines were equally engaging. The characters were interesting & complex and I loved the often atypical family dynamics. Angus and Simon Peter are sympathetic protagonists and several of the secondary characters (especially Charlotte) either quickly, or eventually, became favorites of mine.

Chris says

A rich and sensitive novel about war, home, love, and family. While slow, it was worth taking my time. An incredible debut by an "older" writer, it gives us all hope!

Jane says

I enjoyed and highly recommend this World War I novel about a fishing village in Nova Scotia during the war years. One of her sons, Angus McGrath, a talented artist, navigator, and mapmaker enlists in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, partly for patriotism and partly to search for his brother-in-law, Ebbin, a soldier, who has been declared dead. ID discs have been found but no body. Angus feels he is still alive. Angus has been told he will be posted behind the lines in London as a cartographer. Since there happens to be a surfeit of cartographers he is sent to the front to the infantry. The novel smoothly cuts from the village to the front lines back and forth. We are given a good picture of how the whole village, especially Angus' wife, son and sister carry on. The war scenes were especially vivid; they took me right to the horrendous conditions in the trenches, the skirmishing, and Vimy Ridge. Yes, he finds Ebbin, but the man is incredibly changed. After Angus is wounded with a bayonet to the shoulder and he is sent home with a paralyzed shoulder. We see finally how the war years have changed everyone into acceptance of a new way of life and thinking.

The characters were very believable. Angus' father's boat, the old and irreparable *Lauralee* to me was a symbol of the passing of the old way of life. When I read about the *Lauralee* at the end of the novel, I thought of Chekhov's play The Cherry Orchard; the boat and the chopping down of the eponymous fruit trees mean the same thing. In this novel, Simon Peter, the son, helps to build a new up-to-date boat, the *North Star*. I felt it [along with even its name] was a symbol pointing to the coming new times and changes. I liked the author's flowing and descriptive writing style. I felt the story was paced well.

Jennifer Hendzlik says

*Excited! My review made it onto Library Reads November 2013 list.
<http://libraryreads.org/november-2013...>

"Angus walked down to the end of the wharf and felt a release that filled the sky. Beauty had not abandoned him. He'd abandoned it. On the battlefield he'd risked life in the midst of death. And he had not risked it since. He closed his eyes and let the stars fall around him."

Angus MacGrath is caught between the artist he longs to be and the sailor his father believes is more fitting for a man supporting a family on the coast of Nova Scotia. When Angus' brother-in-law Ebbin disappears during World War I and his wife mentally begins to disappear he enlists with the promise of a safe cartographer's job in London. Away from any actual fighting, he will be able to search for Ebbin. Instead, Angus is thrust into the front lines of battle in France. He finds himself an officer and changing in ways he never imagined in a world where death is expected and surviving is a surprise.

On the home front, Angus' son Simon Peter also struggles to find who he will become as he tries to understand his pacifist grandfather, emotionally vacant mother and a country caught in the patriotic fever that only something as unknown and distant as a war across the sea could create. The cost of loyalty, the ugly face of prejudice and the hell war brings to both the soldiers on the front line and those who wait anxiously back home weaves a never sentimental but very soulful story.

I have been struggling to write this annotation not trusting how to put the experience of this book into words. The research done is incredible. To say the words are beautiful seems wrong to say in a book that gives you vivid descriptions of war, the life in the trenches experienced and also the juxtaposition of the beauty of Nova Scotia. The emotional havoc is palpable but the story line rarely goes where you expect it. The characters are well-drawn and so flawed that they linger in your head after finishing. Life changes in the blink of an eye and Duffy does a masterful job of letting the reader watch everyone desperately trying to catch up.

All these words to say, I did not want this book to end.

Karen says

Very much enjoyed this book! The parts in France on the battlefields were vivid and heartbreaking. So much to talk about in this book, can't wait to meet the author at Booktopia 2014!

Candice says

Another excellent work of historical fiction about World War I. Since my grandfather served in the infantry in this war, I always think of him when I read books on the subject. He never talked about it, and I wonder what he saw and felt. This book brought all of the horrors of war to its pages. Nova Scotia fisherman and artist Angus McGrath enlisted in the Canadian army because he hoped to go to Europe as a cartographer and find his brother-in-law, Ebbin, who was missing in action. Since there were already more than enough cartographers in London, Angus was sent to the front lines in France. Meanwhile, his young son, Simon Peter, had to do a lot of growing up while his dad was away. I give it four stars instead of five because I thought that some of the battle scenes were a bit long, but the writing is exquisite and the characters memorable as we see the effects that war has on soldiers, their families, and their communities.

Ann says

This tale of the Great War is lyrical, lovely and still suitably horrifying. Unbelievable that this is the first novel by P.S. Duffy.

Her sure hand brings to life Angus, wife Hettie, pacifist father Duncan and son Simon Peter. Angus's background as a Nova Scotia sailor helps him make his way through the trenches in France. Ostensibly signing up to locate his missing brother-in-law Ebbin Hant, kilt-clad Angus finds his plans are subject to illogical orders from above and happenstance.

At home Simon Peter is dealing with anti-German sentiment especially against his beloved teacher.

I slowed down to savour this story. Remarkable in its scope and imagery. Unforgettable.

Melissa says

The story begins in a small fishing village in Nova Scotia. We see a father and son sailing together in a tiny boat, the father-&-son bond strong, the scene is one of tranquility and beauty. It forms one bookend of this story that serves as a strong foundation for the trials ahead.

It is WWI. The father in the boat is Angus MacGrath, and his son is 13 year old Simon Peter. Angus is a troubled man, trying to do his duty as a husband, father and son. In 1915 his brother-in-law and best friend, Ebbin Hant signs up to fight. After a few months of correspondence there is silence and they are worried about what has happened to Ebbin. Assured that he can work as a military cartographer in London, Angus signs up in the hopes that he can then search for Ebbin from the safety well away from the front lines. However, when he arrives in London, the assurances he had received all but vanished and he is sent to the front lines.

The story alternates between Angus in the midst of the fighting, and Simon back home trying to understand the effects of the war as changes take place in their village.

This is a beautifully written story. The scenes at the front lines are harrowing and they remind me of the ones I read in *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden. I felt I knew the characters and watching many of the die just made me hold my head and weep. Angus does find Ebbin and the story the author dreamt up did surprise me and made me think - how many times has this scenario happened in real life?

I am amazed that this is a debut novel. I hope to read more of this writer in the future. The emotional resonance I felt was similar to when I read *The Light Between the Oceans* by M.L. Stedman. The closing scene of the novel is perfect as it really served as the other bookend to this story.

Julie says

It doesn't get any more flat or colourless than this. One would think, with all the inherent drama of WWI that

this would ring with rage or pathos; instead, we are bored into insensibility for 366 pages. This is only a good representation of the horrors of World War I if the Allies won the war by boring their enemy to death.

I should have been in full alert by page 73: "... *Hanson and Tanner sat solemnly popping lice eggs off their uniforms with lit matches. Two others beyond them were hunched over, staring dumbly at the ground in a waking sleep.*" I'm not sure if I'm the one popping lice eggs or whether I'm one of those who sits in a stupor, but either way, I related to these lines. When you hit this page, you've reached the zenith of excitement in this novel.

Father, son, grand-son, brother-in-law are cardboard cut-outs: archetypal, platitudinous characters who spew mundane (and moth-eaten) truisms, fulfilling their respective destinies as the nonsense characters that they are. Nonsense, in its true form, being of "no sense" at all.

The ephemeral Hettie, who is presumably meant to portray a romantic feminine figure whose spirit is too good for this world, comes across simply as a blithering idiot. Ebbin isn't far behind, so perhaps this is merely a family trait.

I found the historical setting to be exotic and yet precise -- so precise, in fact, that it reads like someone is copying it straight out of an encyclopedia. Dates, numbers of fallen warriors, weather, number of rats in the trenches, and depth of mud: all items gleaned and reproduced, almost in list-fashion, from the pages of Britannica. (Many have spoken of Duffy's "exhaustive research" but I can't find anything more in-depth than I would find in any encyclopedia.)

I predict great things for this novel: it's just the sort of thing that will end up on Canada Reads as the exhaustive, quintessential Exemplar of Canadian Literature -- and it makes me shudder for the future of CanLit. We are all too afraid to call a spade a shovel in this country.

Amy S says

"And I wonder why I do not care for the things that are like the things that were...Does half my heart lie buried there..."

4.5 stars

Above is a poem recited during a hospital scene in this book. The atmosphere of this time period is created well. Characters are written thoroughly and woven into your heart without you realizing it, so that the loss of any of them is felt terribly.

Angus McGrath leaves Nova Scotia Canada to find his brother-in-law. He signs up to fight for Canada in The Great War, being promised a safe job as a cartographer in London using his art skills. Unfortunately, reality hits when he reaches England. The last thing the Allies need is another cartographer. What they desperately need are bodies, especially since it is almost time for the Battle of Vimy Ridge in France.

The book jumps back in forth between the viewpoint of Angus in France, and his son and family in Nova Scotia. It touches many issues of the time and for the most part kept my interest going.

It is not a book that wraps up all the loose threads, which normally would drive me nuts. But here I felt peaceful and hopeful, and that was enough. I would have liked to know more about his relationship with his wife, and more about Juliette and Paul. There were a couple lulls in the action of the book that thankfully got back on track. That was maybe the only frustrating thing for me. I would say 4.5 stars, showing it as five because it kept me thinking about it for a while when I finished reading.

I enjoyed the book. Which is good since I hit three disappointments in a row previously. Honestly, I think this is a book that one person will give a five and another a three. Very subjective.

For sensitive readers: The book is obviously set during WW1 and one of the most bloody and decisive battles in France. It does deal with the effects of war and battle, but is not presented in a graphic way. It is straight-forward without being in your face. Much is left to your imagination. There is a handful of curse words, mostly in the middle of battle. They were not frequent enough to keep me from reading.

Antonia says

This is an accomplished and beautifully written novel, quality historical fiction with memorable characters, passion, devastation, and beauty. The chapters alternate between the fishing village of Snag Harbor, Nova Scotia, and the French Front during WWI. The point of view shifts between Angus McGrath, a coastal trade skipper and amateur artist and his 13-year-old son, Simon Peter. When Angus's beloved brother-in-law is reported missing in action in France, Angus enlists — against his father's wishes — with the hope of finding him. Though assured of a job in a London office as a cartographer, Angus is instead shipped to the Front and finds himself leading his men through battle after battle — trench warfare with all of its horrors: shells, howitzers, mustard gas, flamethrowers, blood and gore, and futility. Despite the senseless brutality of war, there are moments of tenderness and brotherhood among Angus and his comrades. Humanity in the midst of numbing inhumanity.

On the home front in Snag Harbor, Simon Peter negotiates his own world of complex emotions and relationships. He terribly misses his father and fears that Angus will never come home. Meanwhile he helps his mother, tolerates his grandfather, befriends and tries to defend a favorite teacher, meets a girl, and helps various others in need. He learns that the world as he thought he knew it can change at any moment, and that people are not always what they seem. There are enough plot twists and surprises in both story lines to keep the reader turning pages. And there are stunning moments of gentleness and beauty — the beauties of nature and of the human spirit — that can take your breath away.

Map, compass, North Star, lifeline. A sense of direction. These guides recur throughout the book, a book that uses the metaphors of maritime navigation to speak of a deeper, interior journey, a navigation of the inner life — the delicate balance of truth and lies, the swells and troughs of human emotion, the many sides of human nature, its kindness and its cruelty. It's a book about love, duty, honor, bigotry, manhood. But it's also about holding steady in the face of natural disasters and human error, keeping faith in the face of the unknown, holding on to one's integrity, sanity, and moral compass in the midst of war, loss, and disappointment.

Ron and Judy says

Moves seamlessly between home and the front giving fresh insights to both.
A good read for all sexes and ages.

Carol says

P.S. Duffy's was one of the superb authors to speak at Books On The Night Stand's Booktopia Vermont event this past weekend. Procrastination found me reading Penny Duffy's [The Cartographer of No Man's Land](#) at the last minute. I literally finished at lunch just before her talk.

I truly did not realize I could be so interested in a book about the first world war. Penny Duffy feels this is due to America's distance from the causes and issues. The reality of war jump right off the page as her descriptions of battles, trenches and the like make you feel you are there, feel the pain, the sorrow, the devastation that these men endured. Do not let this keep you from reading [The Cartographer of No Man's Land](#). There is more. It is a story about fathers and sons, husbands and wives, loss and love. The language is exquisite.

It quickly became evident to me that this fast reading was a huge mistake. I did get the essence of the story and a realization that this is a special book, one that merits a closer, slower, reading. I am certain I missed things in my fast read. My plan is to revisit this when a larger piece of reading time permits. [The Cartographer of No Man's Land](#) deserves no less.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Short review posted on Book Likes:

<http://jeanettetherefugee.booklikes.c...>

Chrissie says

ETA: I figured it out. Even though I ought to love this book, I don't, and that is because there is little humor in it. I don't need laugh out loud humor, but I want to smile at the way the author draws a situation or a person. No, there is very little humor in this book so reading it is kind of a chore. It ought to be good, but it isn't really. Don't tell me humor doesn't belong in a book about a war. There is always something to smile at when a book is about people!

I just picked up *The Other Side of the Bridge*, and reading this I knew at once what was wrong with *The Cartographer of No Man's Land*. In Mary Lawson's book each sentence makes me smile. I don't know if the book will be good but at least for now reading it is enjoyable.

This is a good book of historical fiction. It contains LOTS of interesting information on:

- * the role of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in WW1, culminating in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France April 9-12, 1917.
- * the explosion of the vessel *Mont Blanc* on April 9, 1918 in Halifax Bay and following tidal wave
- * the after-effects plaguing those who survived the war
- * German internment camps in Canada
- * banks fishing and community life in Halifax

All of the above is woven into a story about an extended family living in a village near Halifax. There is a coming of age story, a love story and a story about women who discover their own capabilities. The history is woven into family events so you never feel you are being lectured. It just sinks in. I didn't know that Canadian nurses in the war were referred to as "Bluebirds". I didn't know that some of the Canadian soldiers wore kilts. Sassoon's protests and the development of electro-therapy - it is all here.

The story covers a small time period, a little more than one year beginning in February 1917. Chapters alternate between Halifax and fighting on the front in France, but the time period is the same. It is simple to know where you are - the events and the people make this obvious, and you see what is happening in two places at a given moment in time. Both the war scenes and the life in Halifax drew me in. All of the characters are equally well drawn.

There are other themes too woven into the book - the value of art, traditional foods and flora and fauna and beeches. This author looks at nature; she is aware of nature.

I liked the reality of how the characters behave. I liked the ending. You aren't delivered a fairy tale, but that isn't to say the story is without hope. Pain and hardship and hope are well balanced.

How do I feel on completion? That was a good read. Maybe the reason I don't give it more than three stars is that I have read so many books now on the war so the content just does not surprise me anymore. This is a good strong three star book and I do recommend it.

One word about the audiobook narration by David Marantz. This I did not like, not at all. I had to tell myself to listen to the author's lines and not how they sounded. He made good prose sound corny. There are French characters and their French is just laughable. Let me put it this way, it sounds like I am reading the French, not a native French person. The narration is extremely unprofessional. When he sings you want to laugh. Read the book instead until it is available by another, better narrator.
