

A Reader's Guide



Saints of Big Harbour

by Lynn Coady

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About the Book

"Hilarious . . . Few authors capture a rural teenager's voice as successfully." — *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Coady has crafted a detailed, intimate, and often bleak look at life in a remote and insular corner of Cape Breton, N.S. To call it uplifting would be a stretch, but as social studies go, it's hard to beat." — *People*

"A true grit coming-of-age novel" (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*), *Saints of Big Harbour* is a funny, brutal, and vivid story about small-town life and the inescapable power of gossip. Lynn Coady gives us the unforgettable Guy Boucher, a fatherless teenager and recluse, who finds himself at the center of an ugly rumor. Several versions of the truth emerge and collide through Guy's eyes and the stories of those who surround him — his overbearing uncle, a girl idealized by her town, a quietly wise girl wrestling with demons of her own, his draft-dodger English teacher, and a pair of golden boys trapped in emotional adolescence and in Big Harbour itself.

As the story unfolds in the "rough-and-tumble language of its men . . . [but also] glittering bits of poetry" (*Boston Globe*), so does a portrait of a community driven and oppressed by clichés of gender, strength and beauty, family and love.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding for every reader of *Saints of Big Harbour*.

- 1.** Coady begins the novel with an epigraph taken from the dictionary and a folk song. How does the epigraph relate to the novel as a whole? Why do you think Coady chose to include definitions for "guy" and that particular folk song?
- 2.** A review in the *Guardian* stated, "There isn't a single character here who doesn't convince." What aspects of Coady's characters make them convincing? How does Coady effectively delve into the adolescent male psyche?
- 3.** For which characters does Coady most solicit sympathy? Do all the characters call for sympathy to some extent, or do their actions inevitably stand in the way?
- 4.** Coady tells the story by alternating points of view between Guy and the other characters who surround him. How does using both the first and third person affect the novel? What does the use of so many points of view to tell the story achieve? How does this interwoven method of narration reflect the community Coady illustrates? In what ways does Coady facilitate the transitions from character to character for the reader?
- 5.** In "The Corinne Fortune Story," Pam repeatedly uses the word "fat." What does this reveal about Pam's personality? For which other characters does Coady focus on a single attribute as a means of character development?
- 6.** How does Coady present the realities of life on Cape Breton, and how does she characterize the lifestyle there? How does she bring the setting to life?
- 7.** Why does Isadore become so infatuated with Guy playing hockey? Why does Guy ultimately quit the team, and how does this affect his relationship with Isadore? How would you define the bond between these two characters and the roles they serve in each other's lives?
- 8.** Coady writes of Corinne, "She thinks about Brian until she feels she has him perfected. He is just about real to her" (p. 98). What purpose does this fantastical world serve for Corinne? What sparks its creation?
- 9.** What makes everyone believe Corinne over Guy? What does the novel say about gender clichés and the power of gossip, particularly within a small community?
- 10.** Coady refrains from being straightforward about the details of the rumor and what exactly happens to Corinne. How does this decision affect the novel? What are the advantages of having these details open-ended?
- 11.** Coady writes, "Violence arrives like a natural phenomenon — so arbitrary it could only be from nature, like an undertow at Port Hull beach sucking children out of sight, water wings and all, before parents can look up from picnic baskets" (p. 143). What accounts for the amount of violence in this community? How is this violence justified among the characters and the community as a whole?
- 12.** Why is Hugh so intent on befriending Howard? How do their differing personalities complement each other and collide? Why is Hugh obsessed with finding Guy with Howard?

- 13.** In examining her friendship with Ann Gillis, Pam thinks to herself, "This is the problem with people you feel sorry for. Guilty about. You can't be friends with them. You know they are always waiting for you, you who've showed them sympathy, waiting with their pain, holding it away from themselves, toward you, like something that stinks" (p. 269). How does this passage apply to other characters in the novel beyond Pam and Ann?
- 14.** Corinne is originally drawn to Guy because he is "not from around here," but this generally does not work as an advantage for characters. How does being an outsider affect one's place in the community? Is being an outsider limited to simply not being from Big Harbour? What makes a person an outsider?
- 15.** Howard comes to the conclusion that "people liked him better with his split mouth. They liked him better now that he had attacked a total stranger, drawn blood unprovoked, in the name of defending his sister" (p. 287). What prompts Howard to believe this? What does this reaction say about the crossing and blurring of moral boundaries within the community? What other examples exist within the novel?
- 16.** What enables Alison Mason to turn his life around when Isadore cannot? Why is Alison the one who ultimately is able to help Guy, and why is Guy able to open up to him?
- 17.** Coady describes Guy hitting Isadore over the head with a shovel as "almost . . . a shared religious experience. Something both awesome and awful. Never to quite be believed, discussed, or forgotten" (p. 307). What significance does this scene hold? What allows Guy to finally stand up to Isadore?
- 18.** Isadore asks Guy, "If you don't have family, what in hell do you got?" (p. 316). What does this novel reveal about family dynamics? How does location inform the family dynamics displayed in this novel?
- 19.** This novel shows how a single moment can cause a series of events to spiral out of control. In the closing paragraph, Guy states, "It was just that one great night I couldn't let go of." (p. 326). Why was Guy so taken with Corinne in the first place? What effect does the final paragraph have on the novel as a whole? What closure is achieved in the characters' lives?
- 20.** What does the title *Saints of Big Harbour* mean? Who are the saints? What does it mean to be a saint?

About Lynn Coady

Lynn Coady was born and raised on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. *Saints of Big Harbour* is her first book published in the United States. She is also the author of *Strange Heaven*, a novel short-listed for the Governor General's Award and the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award in Canada, and *Play the Monster Blind*, a collection of stories. She received the Canadian Authors Association Air Canada Award for the best writer under thirty and the Dartmouth Book and Writing Award for Fiction. Coady's essays, fiction, and reviews have appeared in publications throughout Canada, and she has written award-winning plays and a screenplay. She currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

A Conversation with Lynn Coady

Q) How did the idea for *Saints of Big Harbour* originate?

A) Growing up on Cape Breton Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia — this experience informs most of my creative writing. The small-town, fishbowl existence, the power of gossip, the devastating consequences of chronic economic hardship in Atlantic Canada. The privileged position of masculine culture, its subsequent, damaging stranglehold on men and women alike. Specifically, the idea for the novel came about as a result of a short story I wrote where I wanted to explore the interior world of the typical "thug" — that is, the type of guy who would be perceived by a certain class of person as a thug. I ended up being startled by the depth I uncovered, as well as the depth of sympathy I had for this character. It turned out to be an entire novel's worth of sympathy.

Q) Was it difficult to write from a male perspective?

A) I'm a bit of a student of guy culture and guy life, so that part wasn't hard. I have three brothers, and my dad is a big guy's guy who is interested in hockey and politics. I grew up thinking guy stuff was all that mattered, and if I made a study of it, I would be accepted as one of the guys. Of course, things don't work out that way, but eventually I was able to use it in my writing, so it all worked out in the end.

Q) What are you working on now?

A) For the past year I've been working on a novel called *Mean Boy*. It's a satirical look at the idea of "literary celebrity" as it existed in Canada in the seventies, from the point of view of a painfully idealistic nineteen-year-old boy who wants to be a poet more than anything. It was a period when there was a lot of big-fish–small-pond kind of stuff going on, a lot of territorialism and backstabbing, which for me is funny to imagine in these tiny university enclaves in the middle of nowhere. Many people thought the very future of the nation depended on whether the "right" kind of poetry was being published, and fought each other tooth and nail about it. It was a very masculine, pugilistic attitude to have toward poetry, of all things, but my character, wanting desperately to be a part of that scene, is not particularly masculine or pugilistic at all. So the title is kind of ironic. He's not really a mean boy, although he tries his darnedest.

For Further Reading

The following novels may be of interest to readers of *Saints of Big Harbour*.

[Monkey Beach](#) by [Eden Robinson](#)

[Kit's Law](#) by [Donna Morrissey](#)

[The Hallelujah Side](#) by [Rhoda Huffey](#)

[Special](#) by [Bella Bathurst](#)