

Writer's debut book deftly illustrates life and truth

What is Invisible is the first book from writer Beth Ryan, and it's stunning. The even dozen stories here are keenly honed, peopled with characters full of life, and truth, who grapple with the intimate events and domestic crises that are the essence of drama.

Teenage girls hitchhike, recklessly. A married couple quarrel over money, foolishly. A child listens, again and again, to the best story she's ever heard: how her parents fell in love.

Many of the stories are based in Newfoundland, but they also range to Toronto newsrooms, Florida condos and Prairie highways.

The Newfoundland locales shift, too, from the downtown and the Avalon Mall of St. John's, circa 1970, to Kennedy-era Catholic homes where six kids run amok, to a sad gaggle of nowadays hookers clustered around Cathedral Street.

Ryan is equally deft with narrative points-of-view. The stories unfold through the eyes and ears of a young department store employee, a 90-year-

old man in hospital and a cop who treats both his criminals and his women the old-fashioned way.

The work is packed with details — how people dress, what they drink and the speed at which it's consumed, the way they carefully style their hair, or not. All of this is vividly, vitally observed.

In Northern Lights, "Sharon can see Marie Williams, who's married to the pharmacist and works in the drug-store part time. Sweet as you please when she's behind the cash,

but wait until she gets a couple of White Russians into her. She's wearing a frothy pink thing with a bow on the arse."

(Ryan's writing is spiced with lots of good Newfoundland vernacular. People also "steele" about and constantly refer to one another as "sweetheart" and "my ducky.")

Sharon is tending bar for a Fort Mac-Murray "time," watching displaced Newfoundlanders interact as they never would back in Placentia.

"People who you barely spoke to back home become your best pals when you're living thousands of miles from home."

Another character, Walter, finds guys joshing and joking with him — the same guys who played a near-fatal prank on him when they were all youngsters.

Not part of in-crowd

They reminisce about good times back in high school. Remember that, Wally? one of them will say, cuffing him on the arm in a show of camaraderie. But Walter does not remember. He was not along for that weekend at the cabin or that beach party. He had

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only one friend in high school, and David is not among the crew here."

In Light Fingers, Philomena longs — as only a teenage girl can long — for all the pretty, normal things that other girls have. She knows she doesn't fit in to the breezy world they inhabit. Philly works at the Woolworth's lunch counter, a job that requires her to wear a brown polyester uniform and hairnet. The other girls in the store are customers, not employees.

"All of these girls look the same. They wear short, plaid bomber jackets with fake fur collars, which expose their skinny bums and reedy thighs. Their hair is long and shiny, thanks to endless bottles of shampoo and creme rinse, parted in the middle and flipped back with the help of a curling iron."

Everyone who just flashed back to a Hardy Boy poster tacked up on a fake wood panelled

wall, please raise your hand. You see how evocative Ryan's writing is?

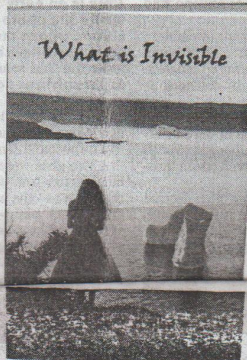
She's dexterous with characters, ranging from an elderly woman in an inadequate hospital gown, trying to manoeuvre her thin, painful shoulders into position for an X-ray, to a dapper, feckless father whose charming appeal is potent, but finite.

She shifts easily between first- and third-person narration, always locating some telling trait. Characters nerde Love's Baby Soft cologne, or leave each other gifts of six cigarettes, wrapped in tinfoil, to get through the day. Their surroundings — kitchens or boarding houses or boyfriends' bedrooms — are precisely visualized.

Yet, What is Invisible is aptly titled. For what is invisible? Love and grief, a need, a fear. What attracts people to each other, or repels them.

These dreads and desires live in the heart and the mind. But, in her writing, Ryan handily details their depths, effects and trajectories. Her words illustrate the invisible.

Joan Sullivan is a writer and theatre director living in St. John's. Her column returns Oct. 12.



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