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**Title:** Icebergs: a novel

**Author:** Rebecca Johns

**Summary:** Alister Clark and Walt Dunmore are the only survivors of a World War II plane wreck on Newfoundland's Labrador coast, but although only one man returns home alive, both of their families' lives remain entwined through the years.

**Related Information:** Recommended Reads

**Publication Information:** New York: Bloomsbury: Distributed to the trade by Holtzbrinck Publishers 2006. 320 p.

**Reading Level:** Adults

**Min./Max. Grade Level:** Adult-Adult

**ISBN:** 9781582344980  
1582344981

**Fiction/Nonfiction:** Fiction

**Dewey:** 813.54

**Author Information:** All books by: Johns, Rebecca, 1971-

**Book Jacket:**



**Subject Headings:** Married people  
Parent and adult child  
Families of military personnel  
World War II veterans  
Husband and wife  
Widows  
Family  
Family relationships  
Moving, Household  
Survival (after airplane accidents, shipwrecks, etc.)  
Triangles (Interpersonal relations)  
Interpersonal relations  
Deception  
Marriage  
Aging  
Friendship  
Intergenerational relations  
World War II -- Canada  
Vietnam War, 1961-1975  
Chicago, Illinois -- History -- 20th century  
Canada -- History -- 20th century

Historical fiction  
 Psychological fiction  
 Domestic fiction  
 Family sagas

**Related Features:** Recommended Reads - Adult -> Historical Fiction -> Family Sagas

**ISBNs Associated** 9781582344980

**With This Work:** 9781582345727 (Paperback)

**Credits:** Novelist/EBSCO Publishing  
 Baker & Taylor  
 Booklist, published by the American Library Association  
 Publishers Weekly, A Reed Elsevier Business Information Publication  
 Library Journal, A Reed Elsevier Business Information Publication  
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 Added to Novelist: 20060220  
 TID: 140145

**Database:** Novelist

**Booklist Review:** As a young Canadian during World War II, Walt Dunmore is on a bombing mission when his plane is shot down over Newfoundland. Initially, only Walt and crew-mate Alister Clark survive the crash. But injuries and subzero weather take their toll, and Walt fails to keep Alistair alive. Walt returns home to his wife as a man recovering from the scars of war. The responsibility he felt toward Alister now extends to Alister's young widow and her baby girl. Together, both families move from their Canadian farming community to Chicago to begin a new life. The novel follows the fates of the Dunmores and the Clarks as they contend with an ever-changing world. As time passes and Walt's son becomes romantically involved with Alister's daughter, old questions return like ghosts from the past and must be confronted as another war--Vietnam--strains the bonds of friendship and family. A deeply satisfying novel that shows how people--like icebergs--often reveal only 10 percent of themselves, while the rest remains hidden beneath the surface. -- *Jerry Eberle* (Reviewed 12-01-2005) (*Booklist*, vol 102, number 7, p26)

**Publishers Weekly Review:** A plane crash in a remote area of Newfoundland during WWII leaves Canadian gunner Walt Dunmore to endure the oppressive cold along with his navigator, Alister Clark. Johnson's moving debut is at first a gripping account of their quest for survival???intertwined with the stories of their young wives at home???but broadens to a multigenerational epic. When only Walt makes it back to Ontario, his life is forever linked with his comrade who died. The plot rushes forward to Chicago in 1967, where Walt, his wife, Dottie, and their sons, Sam and Charley, live near Alister's widow, Adele, and daughter, Caroline. Both because of and in spite of the bond between their fathers, Sam and Caroline have an affair, cut short by Sam's paranoid jealousy. He enlists and goes to Vietnam, but the family's tragic casualty occurs stateside. The retrospective final part of the novel opens on the characters' lives in 1999. With stark, lovely prose, Johnson weaves a delicate tapestry of linked narratives, confirming that the paths not taken can be as significant as the ones taken. Like a ship navigating around an iceberg, "even near-misses leave a wake, an invisible breath that moves through the air." (*Apr.*) - *Staff* (Reviewed November 7, 2005) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 252, issue 44, p47)

**Library Journal Review:** In this work, whose title is a metaphor for the sinking effect war has on everyday life, we read about lives being changed by calamitous events and wrong choices. The victims of such change include a veteran who dies as a result of radiation contracted in World War II; his wife, who suffers from loneliness and worry while he's away; and their son, who chooses the Vietnam War over his childhood sweetheart and whose later marriage to another woman is ruined by the aftereffects of

that war. Other victims are a mother who becomes neurotic after her husband's death in World War II and her daughter, who displays similar symptoms when her boyfriend enters the Vietnam War. Debut novelist Johns is ambitious enough to tell a story that spans several generations, revitalizing the wartime genre. Her meticulous presentation of details will make readers feel they are actually witnessing the events, although sometimes the narrative is hurried to the extent that this is lost. This work has the appeal of a best seller and is recommended for public libraries.???*Victor Or, Vancouver & Surrey P.L., B.C.* -- *Victor Or* (Reviewed December 15, 2005) (*Library Journal*, vol 130, issue 20, p113)

**Kirkus Reviews** An earnest debut that opens with a terrifically exciting plane wreck over Labrador, then dwindles into decades of complacency.

Walt Dunmore is the air gunner of a bomber forced down by bad weather three hours from Iceland, in 1944. He is the only survivor, rescued (with both hands frostbitten) after several days of watching over his friend and navigator, Alister Clark, who bleeds to death in the wreckage from a shoulder wound. Once Walt is returned to wife Dottie, living with her family on the Lake Erie shore, the story abruptly shifts to America in 1967. During the Summer of Love, Alister's daughter Caroline, a Chicago librarian and poet, wonders what's become of childhood sweetheart Sam Dunmore (Walt's son), who seven months earlier enlisted in the army. The two families emigrated to the U.S. in the '50s and stayed in close contact. While Sam is away, Caroline starts going out with his mischievous brother Charley and even discusses marriage. Much of the story rehashes these convoluted relationships, moving erratically back and forth over the years.

A sentimental sweep of Canadian-American relations. After a promising start, recent Iowa Writers' Workshop grad Johns unrolls a listless tale with much telling and precious little showing.

(*Kirkus Reviews*, October 15, 2005)

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## Icebergs, by Rebecca Johns

The lost heroes of America

By Julie Wheelwright

*Friday, 19 January 2007*

There have been reams written about the massive disruption caused by the servicemen who returned home after long absences during the Second World War. For many children, their father was only a photograph on the mantelpiece until his jarring reality came back. After the war, divorce rates soared. There were also the thousands who didn't return, or came back nursing deep mental or physical wounds. But Rebecca Johns's tautly written debut novel looks at how those effects lingered into the next generation, with often devastating consequences.

*Icebergs* opens as a Liberator aircraft with a Canadian crew, heading from Iceland in 1944, is shot down over the wilderness of Labrador, killing the pilot and tailgunner. Alistair Clark, the navigator, and Walt Dunmore, the wireless air gunner, survive the crash into dense forest in midwinter. Walt suffers burns to his hands but does what he can to keep his mate alive despite the freezing temperatures. Finally, a trapper finds them but by then Alistair is dead, and Walt's hands so severely frost-bitten he will lose seven fingers.

In the morgue, Walt removes a photograph and letter that would have incriminated Alistair's reputation as a dutiful husband. Back home, Walt's young wife Dottie waits for the return of a virtual stranger. From there, the couple must carve out a new life together. When they move to Chicago with their two sons, Adele, Alistair's widow, and daughter Caroline join them. But Adele's life is blighted by this early loss, despite the support of Walt and Dottie.

Johns explores in gritty detail the corroding effect this has on Caroline, shaping her attachments and ambitions. Walt's sons also come of age during the Vietnam War and his eldest, Sam, drops out of university to repeat the cycle and enlist with the US army. When Sam is deployed, he remembers his father's caution that "the only true war story... is one in which you are never the hero. It is never about what happened but about the shock of finding yourself alive on the other side of it."

Johns has drawn the domestic parallel with wives and children affected by that shock. She also explores that rare territory of Canadian experience, life in the US - where, unlike Poles, Czechs, Croats, Slavs, Greeks or Jews, they had no identifiable neighbourhood. "They blended." So too have their individual histories, which Johns has shaped into a powerful narrative about the complicated ties that bind.

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**INTERVIEW WITH AN AUTHOR:  
REBECCA JOHNS, AUTHOR OF *ICEBERGS***

DONNA BLACKALL

In April 2006, Bloomsbury Publishing will release *Icebergs*, the first novel by Rebecca Johns. As an Antioch Community High School student, Rebecca was recognized as one of the “Best Illinois Poetry and Prose” writers in the *Illinois English Bulletin*. Rebecca has graciously consented to update IATE on her life and to provide some words of inspiration for students and teachers alike.

Q: When did you first start writing? Was there an author you emulated? A teacher who guided you?

A: I’ve been writing as long as I can remember. First, it was little poems and stories, often in the vein of the authors I admired. I was a big fan of the Little House series when I was younger. I read them over and over again. In eighth grade, Mrs. Loffredo at Lake Villa Intermediate School introduced me to *The Outsiders* and *Romeo and Juliet*, both of which influenced me quite a bit over the next few years. Then she let me choose my own book for a self-guided project; it was the first time I had ever been given a stake in my own education. I chose *Great Expectations*, and I devoured it. I felt really invested in literature in her class, more than ever before, and it was then that I completed my first attempt at a novel. It was the first time anyone took my desire to write really seriously.

At Antioch High School I had a number of excellent teachers of literature and writing, like Mike Gordy at the student newspaper, *Tom-Tom*, and John Whitehurst at the literary magazine, *Finesse*, both of whom are still there, or were the last time I checked. Those two teachers gave me my first taste of real responsibility as a writer and editor, and the skills I learned in their classrooms I still use today.

Q: IATE was among the first to recognize your talent as a writer by publishing you as a student in the Best Illinois Poetry and Prose issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*. What are your recollections of this experience? What was the piece?

A: I was so excited to be included in the 1988 *Illinois English Bulletin*. The piece was a poem I’d written

when I was fifteen, called “Goodnight Saigon.” My father is a Vietnam vet (as well as a former special-ed teacher at Waukegan High School) and I grew up hearing his stories about the war. I was no Emily Dickinson, but I had something I wanted to say at the time, and it was gratifying to think someone out there was listening. Considering that part of my novel concerns Vietnam, I suppose I haven’t quite run out of things to say about it yet.

I still have that issue of the *Bulletin*. There were some really amazing pieces in it.

Q: What was your “writer’s journey” from Libertyville to now? What was the significance of your time at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop?

A: I always knew I’d be a writer, and I’ve done most recognized forms of writing, including poetry, journalism, and essays. I studied journalism at the University of Missouri and worked in the magazine business in New York for a while as a writer and editor. But I’m not a great reporter. I don’t enjoy interviewing, and that’s the most important part of the job. The stories I really wanted to tell, and the truths I really wanted to get at, were in fiction.

The Iowa Writers’ Workshop was a hugely important experience for me, but it almost didn’t happen. I wanted to get my MFA so I could teach, but after I’d applied to another program and been accepted, I decided to apply to Iowa because I’d always heard great things about it, and because my idol, Marilynne Robinson, was teaching there. I was sure they wouldn’t let me in. My husband was so sure they wouldn’t let me in he agreed to move to Iowa if I got accepted, no questions asked. You should have seen his face when I got the phone call. But we both love Iowa now and have no plans to leave anytime soon.

In the Writers’ Workshop I had a chance to learn and listen from excellent teachers and writers, all of whom influenced me in one way or another. Ethan Canin was a great mentor and friend, and I wrote the very first words of *Icebergs* in his workshop. Elizabeth McCracken helped and inspired me with an early draft. They say writing can’t be taught, but there are aspects of craft that writers can hone. Most valuable, though, is the chance to get direct feedback from people reading your work, from other students

——— Interview with an Author *continued on page 5*

tion and trivia contest.

Thank you to all who made this event a success: presenters, chairs, recorders, volunteers at the registration booth, Debra Will and the folks at Zion-Benton High School and Brian Conant of University High School for the audio-visual equipment, and the very friendly and helpful staff at the Holiday Inn Select. One participant summed up the conference best when she thanked me and IATE for providing her with an opportunity to gather new ideas to use in her classroom, to make new friends, to relax and take a break from teaching, and to return to her classroom refreshed and ready for new teaching challenges.

See you all October 13–14, 2006, at the Hotel Pere Marquette in Peoria, Illinois. □

Interview with an Author *continued from page 3* —————

and writers. That's something you just can't get on your own.

Q: Tell me a little about the inspiration and creation of *Icebergs*.

A: My grandfather's plane crash provided the germ for the story. When his B-24 crashed in the woods in Labrador in the winter of 1944, he was thrown out of the wreck headfirst into a snowbank, with only his flying boots sticking out. He would have died if his friends hadn't been there to dig him out. It was that image that I started with, a man in a snowbank. I kept coming back to the idea that if things had gone just a little bit worse that day in Labrador, everything would have turned out differently. *Icebergs* shows the ripple effect an event like that can have on families, how it reverberates through time and through generations. It's comprised of three interrelated novella-length parts with different characters, different voices, telling their own sides of the story.

Q: Do you consider your writing to have a "midwestern voice?" How much has your environment molded your writing?

A: This is an interesting question for me, because I've lived all over the country at this point and find that it's in the Midwest where I still feel most

at home, and the Midwest that still inspires me. I include Canada in that, because the part of Canada I'm familiar with is midwestern in so many ways. I suppose outsiders think of midwesterners as plain-spoken people, uninterested in literature, but that's really a stereotype. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is a midwestern book, and one of the most erudite pieces of literature ever written.

When I was growing up, Lake County was still fairly rural, and the towns I lived in were small towns where people had known each other most of their lives. But when I lived in New York City and Chicago, I found that the same thing was true there—that people tended to stay in the neighborhoods where they'd grown up, that they knew all the people in the neighborhood, that they had a shared history. In cities, it happens within neighborhoods, and sometimes those boundaries aren't readily apparent to outsiders. Really, though, I think the whole world is made up of small towns, no matter where you live.

Q: Do you write on a schedule—so many hours or words each day? Do you compose on a computer, or are you a pencil and paper author?

A: I try to write in the mornings, when I seem to think more clearly, and when I'm working on a first draft I give myself a word count every day—a thousand words a day, fifteen hundred words a day. This makes working on the computer a necessity, because I use the word count function to keep track. But the first few so-called "novels" I wrote when I was younger, I wrote out longhand in notebooks and typed on an old typewriter. The computer is a terrific invention to aid writers, though. It makes revision so much simpler.

Q: Who are your favorite authors to read for pleasure? Do you enjoy newspapers and magazines as well?

A: I read all the time. These days I'm finding that reading feels more like a job than the pleasurable activity it used to be, but there are still a number of writers who absolutely transport me with their writing and whom I parcel out carefully so I don't read them all too quickly. I adore Alice Munro and Gabriel García Márquez and Marilynne Robinson. William Maxwell's books are so beautiful I've had to read

————— Interview with an Author *continued on page 6*

Interview with an Author *continued from page 5* —————

them all twice. I also read the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* regularly, and the *Chicago Tribune*. *Esquire* is another favorite magazine—it's always fascinating to see what the opposite sex is reading. I find men very interesting to write about, so I find them very interesting to read about, too.

At the moment I'm reading *A Confederacy of Dunces* and loving it. I have a huge stack of unread books in my house, because I love buying books and owning them. My project for 2006 is to get the stack read.

Q: What advice can you give to teachers of English/Language Arts on inspiring young writers?

A: I think most young writers inspire themselves through their reading. Henry James once wrote that writers are readers moved to emulation, so the more teachers give their students challenging books to read, the more inspired they will be. The books I remember the most clearly were the ones that were the most unusual or the most difficult. When I was a senior, Mr. Corrigan at Antioch High School had us read *Four Quartets*. It was tough, but when I finally "got" it, it felt like a real accomplishment for me. I had teachers in college who said they didn't teach those poems because students found them too difficult. But "difficult" is a good thing when it comes to students invested in literature.

Q: What would you like student writers to know about writing?

A: Frank Conroy, a favorite teacher of mine, once told me that writing is more about character than about talent. I think that's true. I don't believe in talent. I believe in hard work, in getting words on the page. I've known lots of talented writers, people whose work quite simply blew me away, but, who gave up at the first taste of adversity. It takes character to sit down and write every single day when the house needs to be cleaned and the bills need to be paid and the dinner needs to be made. It takes character to keep going when there are people out there who don't like your work or don't take it seriously. You should decide how much it matters to you, and if it does matter, then keep at it. That's what character means. □

## FROM THE CLASSROOM: HUMOR WRITING: UNDERSTANDING THE POSITIVE VALUE OF LAUGHTER IN THE CLASSROOM

PAUL SELINE

Teachers face times that try their souls: the chaos that is homecoming week or the cold and bleak days of January, times when teachers want to depart from routine, have a few laughs, lighten things up. Students like to laugh as much as we do and, when given a little guidance, they can write some hilarious stuff. So, if you need an endorphin boost without chocolate, exercise, or sex, a few days spent with humor writing in the classroom might just be the booster shot you're looking for.

Laughter in the classroom is a wonderful thing. Nagueyalti Warren expresses it: "Sometimes laughter erupts from deep volcanic soul space surprising solemn moments like blue crocuses in spring snow." As students try their hand at humor, they can gain practice with writing in a variety of genres, and you'll have a perfect opportunity to discuss with them both healthy and hurtful types of humor. High school freshmen are my target audience, but at the Illinois Writing Project, where I developed these lessons, middle school and elementary teachers said that the unit could easily be adapted to their grade levels.

As I begin my three or four day humor writing unit with my ninth graders in English I writing, I like to start by warming them up. You don't have to be a comedian to get students to laugh. A little research on the Internet and a few cartoons can do the trick. I tell my students a few of my favorite jokes, one of which is about Bill Gates. If you want a good one about him, you can go to <http://people.howstuffworks.com/laughter.htm/printable>. I also put up overhead transparencies with several of my favorite Gary Larson cartoons.

Then I give them the etymology of the word "sarcasm," which comes from the Greek word "sarkasmos," which means "to tear flesh like a dog." I talk to them about how this is such a hurtful form of humor because it requires a victim to mock or made fun of. You can Google "Yo mama jokes" to find some appropriate samples to share with students. Then I explain the difference between self-deprecating humor which would begin "My mama is so \_\_\_\_" (you can fill in the blank) versus attack humor, which would begin "Yo mama is so \_\_\_\_." I tell students

## Icebergs

by Rebecca Johns

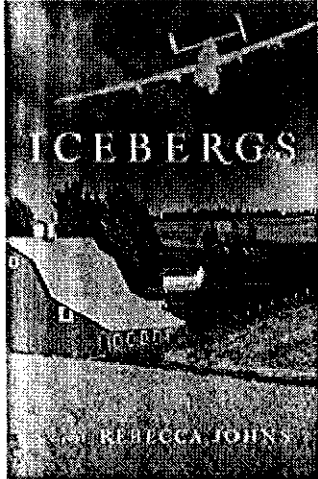
### Reading Group Guide

1. The title of the book refers to the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the mortality of the men in the sea Walt witnesses at the beginning of the story (p. 11). What other “icebergs” occur in the course of the novel?
2. Many of the characters in the novel are “lost,” living in exile—either extended or temporary—from their countries of origin. Dottie and her family are emigrants from Scotland; the Dunmores and Clarks are all emigrants in Chicago. At the beginning of the novel, Walt notes that even the crash site is not really part of Canada: “Labrador was just a lonely Empire outpost on the edge of the sea.” (p. 33) (Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada as a single province after the war, in 1949.) What is the importance of exile in the novel, both physical and emotional? What does it say about the characters that Caroline and Adele return permanently to Canada by the end of the story, but Walt, Dottie and Sam do not?
3. Johns opens the novel with a quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland”: “...is the shipwreck then a harvest, does tempest carry the grain for thee?” Hopkins’s poem, dedicated “To the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns exiled by the Falk Laws drowned between midnight and morning of Dec. 7th 1875,” considers the theological questions posed by tragedy. Why did Johns choose this quote, and what parallels might be drawn between the exiled nuns and the Dunmore and Clark families? Are the two families destroyed, or rescued, by the events in the novel?
4. Religion—specifically Catholicism—runs underneath several events of the novel. Dottie’s rejection of her Catholic upbringing at the beginning of the novel becomes uncertain when Sam later is on the brink of being sent to Vietnam. What does her return to Catholicism at this point in the story say about her state of mind? How does the fact that this part of the story is not told from her point of view affect the way the reader reacts to this re-conversion?
5. Caroline thinks her mother’s behavior toward and involvement with the Dunmore family are inappropriate: “She could see the way her mother’s demeanor changed whenever Walt was there, became girlish even, touching his arm or inviting the Dunmores over for supper and making something special, lamb stew or pork chops, because she knew he liked it. How her mother had sometimes been too nice to Dottie, making a concerted effort to praise her home, her clothes, her children, helping her with dinner or babysitting or sewing or running errands, because really her mother envied Dottie, the woman whose husband had come back.” (p. 126) How does this



revelation change the dynamic in the story? Why do the other characters not see these events the way Caroline does?

6. Who else behaves “inappropriately” in the novel? What consequences do those characters face as a result?
7. The novel’s three-part structure allows the story to take place in three separate times and locations—first in rural southern Ontario during the war, then urban Chicago during the turbulent Vietnam years, then back to agricultural Ontario at the end of the century. Dottie, however, believes that this return to a rural lifestyle is not entirely genuine: “It was quaint, a city person’s idea of a country house.” (p. 255). What does the story’s movement from rural to urban and back to rural say about the way life has changed in North America in the last sixty years? What is Caroline looking for by seeking out the rural life, and has she succeeded in finding it by the end of the novel?
8. Caroline Clark plays a singular role in the novel. In what respects might she be seen as the moral and emotional center of the book? Does the reader’s perception of Caroline change after learning that she wrote to Rosemary Oram, with whom her father had an affair?
9. Many of the characters in the book have fantastic expectations of intimacy that later clash with reality. For example, Dottie’s interest in Bobby wanes when real life intrudes into her fantasy world, but afterward she faces real consequences she had not envisioned. What is the purpose of fantasy in the story? What is Dottie looking for when she goes to look for Bobby at the end of the novel? What other characters live fantasy lives in the novel, and are their fantasies somehow more potent or more tangible than their real lives?
10. The novel touches on four generations of the Dunmore family, and three of the Clark family, showing the ways in which actions taken by one generation affect those in subsequent generations. For example, both Dottie and Caroline suffer aftereffects from their fathers’ infidelity, and both keep their fathers’ secrets. Are the characters in the story doomed to repeat the mistakes of previous generations, or does their knowledge give them power they would not have had otherwise? What other parallels can be drawn between the generations represented in the novel?
11. In the final pages of the novel Sam realizes that his mother will not live much longer: “There would come a time when he would wake up in the morning, and she would be gone, just as Pop was. It seemed too awful to contemplate. And yet there was a relief hovering just behind his fear, a sense of release and of the completion of something imperfect and beautiful.” (p. 296) Why does Sam feel uplifted by this realization? Does the reader have an idea of what Sam’s life will be like after his mother’s death, how his sense of himself will change?



Fellow Goat **Rebecca Johns**, aka The Lovely Becky, has just returned from the 2007 **PEN/Hemingway award ceremony** in Boston, where her novel ***Icebergs*** was honored as a finalist -- meaning the book was judged to be one of the top three by a first-time novelist. We sat down with her, put our feet up on the Internet, and chatted over this delightful news and other topics. Let's listen in:

EG: Being a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway award must have been tremendously exciting. How did you find out? How do you think this will affect things for you?

RJ: My editor called me the last week in February with the news. I think she was as excited as I was. Of all the editors I spoke to during the time the book was up for sale, she was the one who "got" the kind of book I wanted to write, who believed in it and me, so I think it was a validation for her as well.

As far as how it will affect things, I really don't know. I'm curious about that myself.

EG: *Icebergs* was recently released in the UK. Have you had feedback from Scottish or British readers yet? How have Canadians reacted to an American writing a Canadian story?

RJ: I have heard from Canadian readers about the book, and their reactions have been very positive. No one's seemed surprised that an American would write about Canada, but then, others have done it before me. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* was set largely in Newfoundland, and Stef Penney, the British author, wrote *The Tenderness of Wolves* without once having been to Canada. My Canadian relatives all seemed to enjoy

the book, and they're as loud and opinionated as I am, so believe me, I would have heard if they'd been displeased.

The British reviews have been extremely positive. It's been interesting to see the book come out there and in Australia and how the process has been different in each place.

EG: The book concerns a family that emigrates from Scotland to Canada, as your own ancestors did. How much of the book is based on your family? What was it like writing about characters from your own family? Is it harder or easier to base characters on people you know (or knew)?

RJ: My grandmother was an emigrant from Scotland as a girl, but aside from her father, who appears in the story pretty much as I remember him, the rest of the characters took on very distinct personalities of their own early on, and that made them easier to write about. The demands of fiction required this change: I discovered I could not write about people I had known and loved well, because they weren't my creations. I couldn't make them behave the way I wanted. In the end the two families in the novel were vastly different from mine in makeup and circumstances. The last generation of the Dunmore family, coming of age in 1999, is completely unrecognizable from my own. I think that's the way it should be, though. I was inspired by people in my own life, as most writers are, but with any luck the end result is art masquerading as life instead of the other way around.

EG: The story takes place in three distinct time periods. How did you decide on that structure, to skip across the years like that?

RJ: The structure was suggested by the very first piece of the novel I wrote, which started out as a short story and is now Chapter Two of the novel. There was a significant jump of time at the end of the short story between the present events and a distant future in which Dottie was an old woman, looking back at that heady time in her life with a sense that something had gone off, that some potential had been lost. The other people in workshop (you included, G!) thought the jump was too sudden, and it was, so I spent the next three years filling in the things that happened in-between. The final scene of the book is almost identical to the final scene in that short story version.

The three-part structure seemed to work because of the three generations of family that ended up in the book. I wanted something that would be large in its scope but intimate in its details, and the three-part structure allowed me to have my cake and eat it too, so to speak. At least, I hope it did.

EG: *Icebergs* must have taken a ton of research. What kinds of things did you do to research your book?

RJ: I had to do quite a lot of research on two things: B-24 planes and Newfoundland, neither of which I'd ever set foot inside. I had a bunch of old newspaper clippings of my grandfather's plane crash that my grandmother had kept, and I thought those would be enough to help me write the crash scene, but it wasn't--I ended up needing far more detail than I ever thought I would. There is only one B-24 in the world that still flies, and it came through the Midwest in the summer of 2003, so I took a half-hour ride in it out over Lake Michigan and back. That part of the research was fun. So was the trip I took to Newfoundland the next summer, to the Gander air base and St. John's. I saw my first iceberg there. I tried to go on a whale-watching tour, but it was too early in the year for that, so all I managed to find were Arctic birds and a little seasickness. But Newfoundland is unlike any other place I've been to, and it was definitely necessary to have gone. I couldn't write the ending until I'd been there.

Mostly I wrote the scenes I wanted first and went back later to fill in the blanks with research. This method was more efficient than trying to do all the research first, which could easily have taken me ten years.

EG: You've had some odd jobs. Did they "build character" -- or were they struggles you just wanted to get through?

RJ: You mean my stint at McDonald's when I lived in Manhattan? I don't know if that built character, but it certainly got me used to humiliation. After having hookers come in to laugh at you in your little hat and uniform, I have found that book critics just don't seem as threatening.

I worked there the summer after I graduated from college, when the country was in the middle of a recession and no one was hiring. There was a day that summer when I

literally wandered Manhattan with \$1 in my pocket trying to decide if I should buy something to eat or a lottery ticket. That was a very bad day. I ended up buying something to eat, and the next day I walked into Mickey D's and got a job, because I never wanted to have that feeling again.

I've done all kinds of jobs over the years. I've worked in libraries and waitressed at pizza places and clerked at hospitals and been a stringer for national magazines and written at third-rate newspapers and done almost everything short of selling blood and sex. And each job seemed like the only thing to do at the time. I have to work, though--when I have too much time on my hands I end up wasting it.

EG: How did the workshop affect your writing or your sense of yourself as a writer? What do you feel like you took away from your time in the program?

RJ: I came to the Workshop as someone who already had a career and a mortgage and a marriage, and it was no small thing to pick up and move here and leave most of that behind [not the marriage--ed.], but it also meant I came to Iowa already with a strong sense of what I wanted to accomplish while I was a grad student.

The reason I decided to apply to the Workshop in the first place was that even though I'd written two novels and a bunch of short stories in my twenties, I felt like I had little control over them. I had ideas that I loved, but they seemed to appear on the page too haphazardly to be meaningful. I needed more understanding of craft, and I was right in assuming that the Workshop would provide the guidance I needed in that area.

Workshops can't do everything, but they can do that much. Ethan Canin was helpful with things like using flashbacks and writing better dialogue; Sam Chang taught a great class on structure; Marilynne Robinson looked for moral and meaning; Frank Conroy was all about precision in language. Now when I sit down to work I feel I can make better narrative choices, or at least make them consciously, with an understanding of what I'm getting myself into.

EG: We hear you're working on something new. What can you tell us about it?

RJ: I was so exhausted from writing *Icebergs* that it's taken me a while to figure that out, but lately I'm starting to get back into it, and I might have a couple of things in the

works. Surprisingly, because I've never thought of myself as a short story writer, I feel like I might be on the verge of a collection. But of course there's always another novel to write. It's still in the beginning stages, though, so I don't want to ruin the mojo by talking about it too much right now. Mojo is a terrible thing to waste.

May 21, 2006

'ICEBERGS,' BY REBECCA JOHNS

## Storm Damage

Review by MARK KAMINE

In settling on a recipe for the making of successful literary fiction, you could start with a graduate degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, whose recent alumni include ZZ Packer and Curtis Sittenfeld. Next you might sketch out a novel employing a triptych format, providing thematic and character-related linkage between parts ("The Hours"). Mix in war, romance and carefully applied historical detail ("Cold Mountain"). And don't forget to span generations (Maile Meloy's "Liars and Saints"). The result? In this instance, "Icebergs," Rebecca Johns's inviting, occasionally moving, often exasperating first novel.

Johns isn't interested in the slow build. "Icebergs" opens with a plane crash. Walt Dunmore is the radio operator on a Royal Canadian Air Force Liberator, flying cross-Atlantic missions in search of U-boats during World War II. On a return flight the storm-damaged craft can't make it back to the landing field. Walt and another injured airman find themselves stranded in a freezing, snowed-in Labradorian forest. Johns's first chapter deploys clever touches, as when Walt, tossed deep in a snow bank by the crash, uses the direction in which his tears fall to orient himself and climb out. The high drama of uncertain survival and Walt's memories of home and family effectively lure the reader into what looks to be a wartime story of endurance and memory.

But the story shifts instead to the home front. Dottie Dunmore, the airman's wife, lives unhappily with her parents on a farm in southern Ontario. Her husband's rare visits and wartime letters give little comfort, and a flirtation with a farmhand commences and just as suddenly stalls when news arrives that her husband and his crew are missing.

"Icebergs" unfolds in chapters that alternate points of view: Dottie's, her husband's, their son Sam's, Sam's girlfriend Caroline's. Johns's prose, like the falling Liberator she describes in her novel's opening pages, doesn't soar. Awkward figurative language — "the eyes of everyone in the room connected to her like gravity" — and unsuccessfully dramatized assertions ("They were all charming and funny") are distracting and keep you from getting fully immersed in the expansive plot.

Yet anyone who takes on World War II, the 60's, Vietnam and the disappearing rural landscape can't be faulted for lack of ambition. And in spite of the workmanlike execution, Johns arrives at effectively muted moments of revelation. Here's Caroline, holding a photo of the long-dead father she never knew: "He was looking right at the camera, right at her, and she liked to imagine he had known that, years later, she'd be holding the photo and meeting his eyes and trying to guess where, in there, was the beginning of herself."

Caroline and the Dunmore family sons, Sam and Charley, become the central characters of the novel's central section, set in working-class Chicago: "In California it was the Summer of Love, but in the middle of the country it was just summer." The novel's 1967 is unusually free of drugs and rock 'n' roll, and its version of love has little to do with sexual revolution and lots to do with compromised relationships and missed connections. Caroline works in a library, tends to her neurotic mother and dates first Sam, who leaves suddenly to join the Army, and then Charley, whose charm and movie-star good looks come with the kind of irresponsible personality that puts him in harm's way once too often.

There's a soapy familiarity to events here, as when teenage Sam envies the "smarmy rich kids" who get to go out with Caroline while he pines away "in silence." Nevertheless Johns's tightly focused, family-centric approach has its satisfactions. When Sam's war-maimed father casually offers Sam the family car, not long before Sam is due to ship out to Vietnam, Johns nicely underplays the moment. Without mentioning their Canadian birthplace or Sam's imminent departure, Sam's father says, simply, "I can always get another car." What he really means is evident. Sam chooses to stick with the Army.

The final section pushes the action forward to 1999. Marriages have crumbled, people have died, a new generation has been born. Sam takes Dottie, his mother, up to Canada for what is likely to be her last visit. Caroline lives there now, and other friends and relatives will join the party. This brief, elegiac finale describes Dottie viewing her ruined childhood home and encountering the man with whom she'd had the intense flirtation more than 50 years earlier. "His voice was bland and meant to be comforting, easy to digest as baby food, not at all as thrilling and dark as it had been." It's at once understated and grand; a small, somewhat disappointing moment and a take on time's inevitable alterations. Johns overreaches a bit as the novel comes to a close. On Sam and Dottie's return from Canada, the author uses language meant to connect the novel's final page to its first one. You appreciate the attempt, while wishing it felt less forced.

*Mark Kamine's reviews have appeared in the Book Review and The Times Literary Supplement. He is the assistant production manager for "The Sopranos."*

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