

EXCERPT RIVER THIEVES

a novel by Michael Crummey

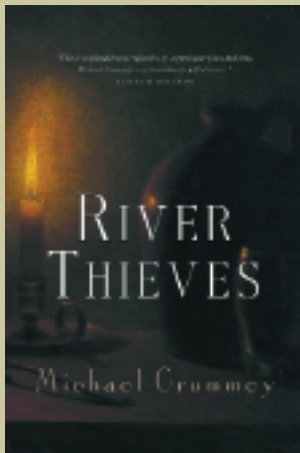


PHOTO: CHRIS MINER

Before all of this happened the country was known by different names. The coves and stark headlands, the sprawling stands of spruce so deeply green they are almost black. The mountain alder, the tuckamore and deer moss. The lakes and ponds of the interior as delicately interconnected as the organs of an animal's body, the rivers bleeding from their old wounds along the coast into the sea.

A few have survived in the notebooks and journals of the curious, of the scientifically minded who collated skinny vocabularies in the days before the language died altogether. Annoo-ee for tree or woods or forest. Gidyethuc for the wind, Adenishit for the stars. Mammashreek for each of the ten thousand smaller islands that halo the coastline, Kadimishuite for the countless narrow tickles that run among them. Each word has the odd shape of the ancient, the curiously disturbing heft of a museum artifact. They are like tools centuries old, hewn for specific functions, some of which can only be guessed at now. Kewis to name both the sun and the moon, the full face of pocket watches stolen from European settlers.

Whashwitt, bear; Kosweet, caribou; Dogajavick, fox. Shabathoobet, trap. The vocabularies a kind of taxidermy, words that were once muscle and sinew preserved in these single wooden postures. Three hundred nouns, a handful of unconjugated verbs, to kiss, to run, to fall, to kill. At the edge of a story that circles and circles their own death, they stand dumbly pointing.

Only the land is still there.

The Lake

March month, 1819

The infant woke her crying to be fed and she lay him naked against her breast in the shadowed river-bottom light of early morning. No one else in the shelter



She had turned and begun walking towards the trees when the stranger's voice carried across the clearing. He was standing on a finger of land behind her, a single figure in a long black coat, one arm raised in the air.

stirred and she almost fell back to sleep herself in the stillness. She could smell a clear winter's day in the air, an edge of sunlight and frost cutting the scent of leather and spruce.

A crow called from the trees outside. The gnarled voice of the forest's appetite. She sang crow's song under her breath while her son's mouth tugged at the nipple.

When he was done nursing, she lay the child beside her husband and pulled on her leather cassock, tying the belt at her waist. She stepped to the entrance, pushing aside the caribou covering. Outside, the glare of sunlight off the ice made her eyes ache and she stood still for a moment as she adjusted to the brightness. The cold in her lungs pricking like a thorn. Thickly wooded hills on the far shore, a moon just visible in the pale blue sky above them. The crow called again, the brindled sound in the clear air like a shadow cast on snow.

She had turned and begun walking towards the trees when the stranger's voice carried across the clearing. He was standing on a finger of land behind her, a single figure in a long black coat, one arm raised in the air. A current of blood rushed to her head, the roar of it in her ears, and she screamed a warning then, running for the entrance of the mamateek. Inside she gathered her child in her arms as the others startled up from their berths around the firepit. A tangled maze of shouting and a panic for the light, adults carrying children outside, heading for the forest behind the shelters.

She followed a small group led by her husband, running down onto the ice and making toward a distant point of land. Over her shoulder she saw the one who had called to her and the others who had lain in ambush, eight or ten of them moving on the camp, carrying their long rifles.

The baby had come only three weeks before and the

tearing pain below her belly burned into her legs and up the length of her back as she ran. The weight of her son like a beach-rock in her arms. She called to her husband and he came back to take the boy, still she fell further behind them. She heard the voice of the white man she had seen on the finger of land again and when she looked over her shoulder he was nearly upon her. She ran another hundred yards before she fell to the ice and knelt there, choking on the cold air and crying.

She turned without getting to her feet and undid the belt at her waist, lifting the cassock over her head to reveal her breasts. The white man had taken off his long coat to chase her, his hair was the colour of dead grass. He set his rifle on the ice and kicked it away, then the smaller gun as well. The rest of the black-coated men were straggling up behind him. He spoke and came towards her with his hands held away from his body. He was terrified, she could see, although she could not imagine the source of his fear. He slapped his chest and repeated several of his words. She looked over her shoulder a last time to the point where her people had disappeared. She turned back to the man approaching her then and she covered herself and stood to meet him.

This was before her husband came down from the distant point to speak to them, before her face was pressed into the grain of a coat as pliant and coarse as deer moss, before the first muffled gunshot was fired. But even as she spoke her own name and reached to take the white man's proffered hand she knew what was lost to her. Her child and husband. The lake. The last good place.

The white man nodded and smiled and then he turned towards the others of his party as they came up to them on the ice. ▣

To read an interview with Michael Crummey visit www.bookclubs.ca

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