

No Great Mischief

By Alistair MacLeod

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Alistair MacLeod musters all of the skill and grace that have won him an international following to give us No Great Mischief, the story of a fiercely loyal family and the tradition that drives it.Generations after their forebears went into exile, the MacDonalds still face seemingly unmitigated hardships and cruelties of life. Alexander, orphaned as a child by a horrific tragedy, has nevertheless gained some success in the world. His older brother, Calum, a nearly destitute alcoholic living on Toronto's skid row, has been scarred by another tragedy. But, like all his clansman, Alexander is sustained by a family history that seems to run through his veins. And through their lovingly recounted stories -- wildly comic or heartbreakingly tragic -- we discover the hope against hope upon which every family must sometimes rely.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
For the MacDonalds, the past is *not* a foreign country. This Cape Breton clan may have lived in the New World since 1779, when Calum Ruadh ("the red Calum") and his wife, 12 children, and dog landed. Scotland, however, remains their true home. So profound is their connection to their lost land that on brief visits they find themselves welcomed by strangers. When one descendent tells a Scotswoman that she's from Canada, she is offered a gentle rejoinder: "That may be.... But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while." In some ways this is unsurprising, since the MacDonalds either have deep black hair or their ancestor's coloring. And those with the latter have "eyes that were so dark as to be beyond brown and almost in the region of glowing black. Such individuals would manifest themselves as strikingly unfamiliar to some, and as eerily familiar to others." Another sport of nature? Many are fraternal twins, including Alistair MacLeod's narrator, Alexander, and his sister.

But *No Great Mischief* is far more than the straightforward saga of one family over the generations. Instead the author has created a painfully beautiful myth in which the long-ago is in many ways more present than modern existence. Even in the last decades of the 20th century, the MacDonalds fall into Gaelic--its inflections, rhythms, and song--with deep nostalgia. This is a family that is used to composing itself in the face of disaster. They often assure one another, "My hope is constant in thee," and in the light of their many losses, the clan must cling to its motto.

No Great Mischief begins with Alexander's visit to Toronto, where his eldest brother now subsists on a diet of drink and memories. The narrator, a successful orthodontist, doesn't have much to do with the former but is unable (or unwilling) to escape the latter. As the novel proceeds, Alexander fills in his family history, including such key episodes as his great-great-grandfather's self-exile from Scotland. Though Calum Ruadh had intended to leave his dog behind, it broke away and tried to catch up with him. MacLeod piercingly captures the animal's struggle as her master first tries to make her head for shore and then--realizing she won't desert him--spurs her on. Throughout *No Great Mischief* various people recall this incident, an emblem of intensity, hope, and dependence. A descendant of the bitch is also on hand when Alexander's parents and one of his brothers disappear under the ice on a cold spring night. She persists in searching for her people and tries to protect their lighthouse from the new keeper, receiving in return "four bullets into her loyal waiting heart." When Alexander's grandfather hears of her death, he uses a phrase that becomes one of the book's litanies, "It was *in* those dogs to care too much and to try too hard."

This is a MacDonald characteristic as well. A good deal of *No Great Mischief*'s strength stems from scenes of longing and despair--for those who die for a lost cause, whether in 1692 when one leader is killed ("the redness of his hair dyed forever brighter by the crimson of his blood") or in an Ontario uranium mine where one brother is decapitated. MacLeod evokes his clan, and the elemental beauty of their landscape, in quiet, precise language that gains power with each repetition. (A sentence such as "All of us are better when we're loved" comes to acquire a near proverbial ring.) If he occasionally tips his hand too much, pressing home his point that present-day prosperity isn't all it's cracked up to be, no matter. I doubt that this inspired and elegiac novel will ever leave those who are lucky enough to read it--proving after all the persistence of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. *--Kerry Fried*

From Publishers Weekly
MacLeod, a Canadian of Scottish lineage, has earned a sterling reputation north of the border based on two collections of stories (Barometer Rising; As Birds Bring Forth the Sun), and with his first novel he will only

add to that acclaim. Already a bestseller in Canada, No Great Mischief (the title comes from General Wolfe's callous reaction to the death of Highlanders enlisted in Britain's efforts to wrestle Canada from France--"No great mischief if they fall") tells the sprawling story of one Scottish clan, the MacDonalds, who come to Cape Breton from Scotland in the 18th century and struggle valiantly to maintain their pride and identity up through the end of the millennium. The narrative is in the hands of a rather staid Ontario orthodontist, Alexander MacDonald, who comes to Toronto to aid his alcoholic older brother, Calum, who is down on his luck in a shabby rooming house and in need of company and a supply of liquor. The two will eventually drive to their beloved Cape Breton where the family patriarch is buried at the edge of a cliff, and along the way the family saga is relived, retold, recast. Alexander, it turns out, was orphaned at age three, along with his twin sister, when both parents fell through the ice when returning to the lighthouse where Alex's father was the keeper. His three much older brothers were already on their own, fishing off the Breton coast, tangling with French-Canadians in mineral mines, drinking hard in bunkhouses, while the twins are raised in relative comfort by doting grandparents. Calum, who seems to carry the legacy of the original Calum MacDonald (who lost his wife on the voyage from Scotland in 1779, leaving him with six children, to which he would add six more), is the dark light, like a bottle of whiskey, through which MacLeod's account is refracted. What emanates is a loving retrieval of a people's native strategy of survival through history and across a changing landscape. Though at times the narrative is confusing, it is cannily so: there are three Alexander MacDonalds to keep track of; there are familial ties that seem filial, then avuncular and then estranged. But the overall effect is authenticity, and the lack of irony is as bracing as the cold spray of the North Atlantic. (May)
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From Library Journal
From the moment Alexander MacDonald sets out along Highway 3 in southwestern Ontario to visit his alcoholic brother living in a cheap Toronto lodging house, this sturdily textured debut novel never hesitates or meanders. There are plenty of diverse characters, changing scenes, and gripping incidents to keep it rolling. Four generations of MacDonalds move through the pages of this bookDfrom the first to arrive in Cape Breton from Scotland in 1779 to narrator Alexander, an orthodontist, and his siblings. MacLeod, who has been heralded in his native Canada as a master of the short story, exhibits a remarkable ability to create and handle an intricate plot that goes back and forth between past and present. Though sentimentality plays a considerable part in the unfolding of the drama, MacLeod's clever writing disciplines and subdues it. The book deserves to be a big popular success.DA.J. Anderson, GSLIS, Simmons Coll., Boston
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Edward Lott:

Reading a reserve tends to be new life style in this particular era globalization. With reading through you can get a lot of information that can give you benefit in your life. Having book everyone in this world may share their idea. Guides can also inspire a lot of people. Lots of author can inspire their very own reader with their story or their experience. Not only situation that share in the publications. But also they write about the data about something that you need instance. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach your kids, there are many kinds of book which exist now. The authors on this planet always try to improve their expertise in writing, they also doing some exploration before they write on their book. One of them is this No Great Mischief.

Cesar Ford:

Would you one of the book lovers? If so, do you ever feeling doubt if you are in the book store? Aim to pick one book that you just dont know the inside because don't evaluate book by its include may doesn't work here is difficult job because you are afraid that the inside maybe not because fantastic as in the outside appear likes. Maybe you answer may be No Great Mischief why because the fantastic cover that make you consider concerning the content will not disappoint you actually. The inside or content is fantastic as the outside or maybe cover. Your reading sixth sense will directly make suggestions to pick up this book.

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