

IN THE GALLERIES Fredericton and Moncton shows explore identity S3

MUSIC Tenor Derrick Paul Miller readies for 'Irish Night' at The Playhouse S5

# salon



## Riding high amongst the waves

Born in the small farming community of Bangor, P.E.I., author Valerie Compton returned to her childhood home for her debut novel 'Tide Road.' Story by Thomas Hodd S4

PHOTO: AARON MCKENZIE FRASER/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL





'Sonia tried not to picture Stella slipping through the ice, but all she could see was how the jagged edges would have cut into Stella's hands,' writes Valerie Compton in 'Tide Road.' PHOTO: AARON MCKENZIE FRASER/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

# The long and winding road

Goose Lane Editions released Halifax-based author Valerie Compton's novel, the powerfully grim story 'Tide Road,' last week. Thomas Hodd traces the ebbs and flows of the first-time novelist.

Over the phone, you wouldn't know Valerie Compton is a first-time novelist.

In her office, she tells me, is an old, upholstered rocker on one side of her desk. That's where she likes to take breaks when she is writing.

"Either that or the couch," Compton says with a chuckle.

Soft-spoken, introspective, with just a hint of a Prince Edward Island accent, Compton currently makes her home in Halifax, where later this month she will officially launch her novel *Tide Road*. It's about a woman named Sonia, whose daughter Stella mysteriously vanishes one day, and how Sonia struggles to understand her loss, her sense of failure as a mother, and the family's suspicion that Stella's disappearance wasn't an accident.

It's a powerfully grim story from a writer who is no stranger to either motherhood or the dangers of living on an island.

Compton was born in Bangor, P.E.I., a small farming community about 20 kilometres north-east of Charlottetown.

"As the crow flies," Compton points out.

She grew up on a mixed farm (later specializing in potatoes). Lucky for her, Compton was also surrounded by storytellers.

"My father was a great oral storyteller," Compton tells me. "My great aunt identified herself as a storyteller too. I also have a memory as a very young child, before I could even write letters, about being alone in my room, thinking up a story, wishing that I could get it down somehow."

The writing would come later, but her love of stories quickly led to an interest in reading. It also helped that Compton's aunt, Governor-General award-winning poet and University of New Brunswick Saint John English professor, Anne Compton, came home for a stint during her teenage years. The aunt's return to the island was a real watershed moment for the budding young reader.

"I read in a haphazard way as a child," Compton says. "But in my teens Anne came home and stayed in the cottage near our house. She had shelves of Canadian literature, and I would go over and talk about the books with her."

Compton remembers fondly such discoveries as Gabrielle Roy, Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.

In the fall of 1981, Compton enrolled at the University of King's College in Halifax. The school's Foundation Year exposed her to an even wider range of books and ideas. Compton got involved in theatre. She also tried her hand at poetry.

"It didn't work out very well," she says.

Compton didn't finish her degree, and spent the next few years between Halifax and P.E.I. working at various jobs. Compton also tried to become more serious about her writing, and even treated her aunt's house as her personal writing cabin for a few months. Then in 1987 Compton enrolled at Grant MacEwan College (now University) in Edmonton, Alta., to study arts administration. The following year she worked briefly at the Workshop West Theatre, also in Edmonton. She also began to write non-fiction pieces and book reviews during this time.

Then life got complicated.

"I started a family and then forgot about everything for a while," Compton admits.

Her first son, Jessie, was born in 1988, followed by her second son, Liam, in 1995. But somehow Compton found time to do freelance work while raising a family. Then in the late 1990s, Compton began writing fiction. She took a correspondence course in writing through Humber College, and developed a few writing friendships at the University of Alberta and University of Calgary. For the most part, though,

Compton worked on her craft alone.

"You might say I was on a do-it-yourself program," Compton says. "I never really had any long-term mentors."

Then, after nearly 15 years of living out West, it was time to move back to the Maritimes.

"I was always yearning to get back East," Compton confesses.

Coincidentally, not long after her return Compton published her first short story. It appeared in the summer of 2001 in *Grain*, a creative-writing journal out of Saskatoon. Then more acceptance letters for her work started coming in the mail. In 2004, one of Compton's stories was shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards. Her storytelling career had finally taken off.

During this period Compton had written two short stories about a woman named Sonia, who had difficulties as a mother. For Compton, who had an instant connection with her own boys, the notion of struggling to be a mother was foreign to her. But rather than forget about it, the writer in Compton took over.

"I kept wondering what it would be like to write about your kids," Compton says. "I also wanted to write about (P.E.I.) as a landscape as well as a cultural place."

And so began Compton's journey to understand what lay at the heart of Sonia's struggles as a mother in *Tide Road*.

What's amazing about *Tide Road* is that it was Compton's first attempt at the long form. Most novelists I've spoken to have at least one or two abandoned manuscripts that they would never, ever show anyone. Compton also wrote the novel after she returned to her birthplace — another anomaly among writers.

"Most novelists need to be away to write about their childhood home. It was just the opposite for me," Compton says.

It wasn't a quick write for Compton, though. The process from draft

to published book took almost eight years. But the journey was a rewarding one. Having a good editor also helped.

"It wasn't about cutting or being told what to do," Compton says. "It was a conversation about craft. She left the decisions up to me. I absolutely loved the process."

And the final product?

"I'm really proud of it," Compton says. "I got pretty close to what I had envisioned."

Nowadays, in addition to her burgeoning writing career, Compton offers fiction-writing workshops and recently gave a talk at the Atlantic Books Awards Festival about the writing life. She is also part of the

year's Writers in the School program, a wonderful initiative by the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia that encourages young students to try their hand at storytelling. Then there is Compton's upcoming tour of *Tide Road*, which includes stops in the Maritimes as well as an event at Toronto's prestigious Harbourfront Centre.

For Compton, it's all about

perseverance and believing in yourself as a writer.

"I had to find my own way," she says.

But her search isn't at an end. For Valerie Compton, her literary journey has just begun. S

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Valerie Compton will cap off the 2010-11 Lorenzo Reading Series on Friday, April 8, at 7 p.m. at the Ganong Hall Lecture Theatre, UNB Saint John.

who belonged at home, beside the oil stove, with her baby in her arms.

Sonia tried not to picture Stella slipping through the ice, but all she could see was how the jagged edges would have cut into Stella's hands.

If only they'd been there, Rob and Dan could have saved her with some simple object from the truck — a rope or a board or a blanket.

The seal sped up when she reached the ice. She tipped her face toward the sky and bawled, as though to say, I'm home, this icy plane is home. Then, with a crash, she broke right through — and immediately grew graceful, as though her body had turned into water too. S

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## From arias to Air Supply

Derrick Paul Miller is a tenor with an operatic voice and truck-stop tastes. Story by Mike Landry

He's spent the past seven years singing in the Canadian Opera Company, but last Sunday Derrick Paul Miller was slurping on turkey vegetable soup at the Rusagonis Blue Canoe Restaurant.

Meeting at the truck stop was Miller's idea. Amid the bustle and clatter of lunch, the 37-year-old tenor from Lincoln shrugs his shoulders at the atypical environment for a classically-trained singer, saying, "When you come from the Maritimes ..."

With 11 years of professional experience and a graduate degree, Miller no longer feels behind his peers as he once did. In fact, he says the tables have turned, and his 'downhome' upbringing is proving more and more advantageous.

"There are things I'm comfortable with that someone who was raised strictly listening to classical music isn't," Miller says. "What I find now is, I'll go somewhere where classical music isn't necessarily being talked about with friends of mine who have been in the industry for a very, very long time, and I'll have to school them on who, like, Buck Owens is."

Miller's eclectic background has been essential to the singer this past year. After his contract with the Canadian Opera Company wrapped up at the end of the 2009-10 season, Miller moved back to his home in New Brunswick for a year to promote his sophomore album *It is Well...*

The sabbatical is something he didn't do with his first album. Only able tour in the summer, he found he was turning down bookings again and again due to obligations to the COC. It took him two-and-a-half years to sell his stock of albums.

*It is Well...* was released in the Maritimes at the end of August, and recently in Toronto on Feb. 4. He says sales have been going so well, he may be putting in another order in a few weeks.

The move home has meant a lot of trips to and from Toronto when work calls, but Miller was home for almost a solid five months last fall. Free from contractual constraints, Miller has been part of countless concerts, including a role in *Christmas @ theplayhouse*.

On Saturday, March 12, Miller will join 17-year-old Fredericton fiddler Kathleen Gorey-McSorley onstage at The Playhouse for *Irish Night*. It's an opportunity Miller would never have had if he stuck to simply being a classical singer.

"Every influence starting from the country music when I was a kid straight through to now, I've just taken the bits and pieces that I enjoy and work for me and gone with that."

"For what I want to do and what I'm happiest doing, which is being on stage and just being Derrick Paul Miller, that's worked out very well so far."

Miller's outlook is shaped by both his personable personality and winding career. Miller didn't receive any formal vocal training until his first year at Acadia University, but has gone on to sing opera, dinner theatre, musical theatre and cruise line cabaret. When times were tough, he worked at a call centre. The only genre Miller keeps to the privacy of inside his car is his love of 1980s hair metal and power ballads.

Each curve in Miller's career fueled the passion for performance first kindled in him as chubby-faced, step-dancing kid.

"I need that. I wouldn't be very happy career-wise if I was just getting up onstage and singing concerts. I love singing concerts, but I have to do a role in an opera or a musical where I actually assume a different character."

At this year's *Christmas @ theplayhouse*, Miller even flaunted his fancy footwork for the first time in years. He's not making



Tenor Derrick Paul Miller returned to Fredericton to focus on his sophomore album. PHOTO: STEPHEN MACGILLIVRAY/CANADAEAST NEWS SERVICE

any promises as to whether his feet will fly for *Irish Night*. But, as a true performer, if the audience wants it, he won't argue.

"It's important to listen to your fans ... Your average listener and concert-goer just speaks from what they like and don't like."

Miller followed his fans for *It is Well...* Whereas his first album sought to capitalize on the popularity of the 'popera' fad of the likes of Il Divo and Paul Potts, *It is Well...* is more classical and includes a selection of sacred songs. Although not a Christian singer per se, his audiences always respond passionately to the sacred songs when he performs.

Miller is especially glad to have his East Coast fan base. He says he feeds off their support and takes it with him wherever he performs.

Miller is a bit disappointed he's missing out on heading to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this year, where the Canadian Opera Company is bringing its production *The Nightingale & Other Short Fables*. But he estimates he was in 21 productions while in Toronto and he's ready to see what more he can achieve.

After *Irish Night*, Miller is looking forward to his showcase performance at the East Coast Music Awards and singing again at the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo in Halifax.

"I'm playing everything by ear ... Right now, I'm feeling what it's like to be a solo artist out there, really doing it on your own. I always had the COC chorus job to get me through. Now I don't have it and it's up to me to get out there and find and make my work, and so far so good. We'll see how far I can go." S

Mike Landry is arts and culture editor at the Telegraph-Journal. He can be reached at landry.michael@telegraphjournal.com.

'Irish Night' with ECMA nominee Kathleen Gorey-McSorley, Derrick Paul Miller and Carolyn Holyoke (piano), comes to The Playhouse on Saturday, March 12. Tickets, \$22, are available at 458-8344 or www.theplayhouse.ca.

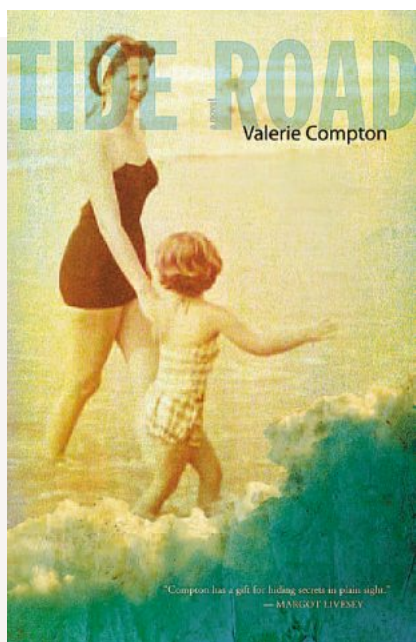
## QUARTETTO GELATO



An oboist, cellist, virtuoso violinist, World Accordion Champion player and a dazzling tenor create an irresistible mix of sizzling tangos, hot Latin rhythms, classical masterpieces and more.

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Friday, March 25 at 8 p.m.  
www.theplayhouse.nb.ca  
Box Office 458-8344 or 1-866-884-5800

Imperial Theatre  
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www.imperialtheatre.nb.ca  
Box Office 674-4100 or 1-800-323-7469



The following is an excerpt from 'Tide Road' by Valerie Compton.

The week before she disappeared, Stella had been obsessed with a seal cow that came into the yard. The seal was lost, but it seemed miraculous to Stella, a massive sea creature on dry land. She'd crawled up from the river in the night, alternately rolling like a tipped pint of cream and pulling herself forward with her powerful flippers. You could see the track she'd made around the yard, a wide ribbon of packed snow, wavy and lustrous as a slug trail. She looked boneless, her tapered body fattest in the middle, her thick skin smooth and moistly shiny from a distance. Close up, you could see the fear in her big dark eyes.

Seeing that look was what made Sonia think of telephoning out for help. First she called Kip Creamer, the veterinarian in Montague.

Then, at his suggestion, she called Clem Sweet, a biology professor at the university. Dr. Sweet said, "Get her in a truck and take her to the shore." That made sense. Rob and Dan herded her to the truck and then lured her up a plywood ramp with a piece of salt cod on a string. Sonia watched her through the rear window of the cab, her liquid look of fear melting to entreaty, then dulling into hopelessness as they drove.

When the seal was in the yard, everyone came outdoors to look. Frances watched it intently, every bit the scientist she yearned to be. Rose crumpled her face in disgust or fear. "Get it away!" Stella, who'd come 35 over from her own house, fixated on the oddness of seeing a water-loving animal on land. She kept laughing over that. "Poor thing, she's out of her element!" Stella would say, and hoist baby Kate high into the air to look down at

the seal. It was as though the circus had come around. No one got to work until late, and Stella grew giddy with the idea of creatures switching elements.

Sometimes it seemed Stella was entirely bereft of common sense. Why couldn't she have been more careful? Why didn't she test the ice? Why did she go down to the river in the first place? She was contrary — that was the problem. With Stella, everything had to be upside down and backwards. Sonia thought of smashing the ice, of it coming apart in her hands, of hauling Stella out and Stella wanting to climb in again. She'd been so obstinate as a child.

And the ice itself was perverse. Some of it was lolly, the police had said.

Lolly makes a shushing, roaring sound. Sonia knew from childhood. Soft ice, it's called, but in fact it's sharp, not soft at all. You would

think it would be cold, but being in it's warm, toasty warm. You can't skate over it like sheet ice or swim in it like water. It's sticky and surprisingly difficult to move through. It builds up on objects that are immersed in it. If it built up on the eyes it would cloud your vision. It's a sloppy, slushy, sludgy veil, and it runs much deeper than you would imagine.

The seal cow barked and bared her teeth when they stopped the truck beside the wharf. Rob and Dan let down the gate, and she drove at them so that they backed away, then she flung herself from the bed of the truck before they had a chance to rig up the plywood ramp. They heard her muscular belly scrape across the snow as she flipped to the ice.

Stella's belly was soft from having given birth to Kate, and looked deflated, like over-risen bread dough. It was the belly of a person