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FICTION

Joey learns the cello

JOY PARKS

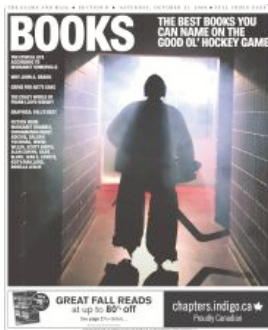
Bow Grip

By Ivan E. Coyote

Arsenal Pulp, 222 pages, \$19.95

Drumheller mechanic Joey Cooper can't get a break. His wife has left him for her lesbian lover, he can't get over his dad's death, his mother and sister won't stop trying to control his life, and the stranger who just traded him a cello for a beat-up blue Volvo had plans to do something very wrong with the car. All these things and more make Joey decide on a trip to Calgary to wrap up a number of loose ends and maybe find a good cello teacher.

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Thanks to Ivan E. Coyote's skill with character development, one immediately feels close to this everyman anti-hero. His survivor's optimism is infectious. As his story unfolds, readers will become smitten with his easygoing ways no matter what comes his way, whether panic attacks or the opportunity to have the family and all the things he wanted, but not at all in the way he expected. Joey's story is one of coping with change and recognizing the gifts that come to us disguised, the everyday magic wrapped in adversity. In this, *Bow Grip* is an unexpectedly moral tale with an undercurrent of humour and irony that is irresistible.

In her previous short story collections, *Close to the Spider Man*, *One Man's Trash* and *Loose Ends*, Coyote has earned a following, particularly among gay audiences, as a storyteller and spoken-word performer. This first novel mimics her short stories in its quiet pacing, unassuming language and straightforward narrative. She has mastered the small-town psyche without a single false note.

Coyote's short stories deal mainly with two broad themes, gender identity and family, themes also central to this novel. But in *Bow Grip*, she moves away from a more personal

voice, creating a wholly credible narrator, an ordinary man whose life is transformed by the changes in the lives of the people who were his anchors. He must, with little warning and no reference points, deal with the hard questions of what self and love and family really mean. And he shines.

Joey is also the tolerant foil to the foul-mouthed, bitter, drunken ex-husband of his wife's lover, who makes late-night obscene calls. During his stay at a rundown hotel in Calgary, he befriends an older man who picks up men, but refuses a gay identity because he was in a devoted marriage for decades.

Amid all the chaos of his Calgary trip, Joey finds a wild, arty, porn-selling musician to teach him how to play the beautiful cello that has fallen into his hands. We see Joey embrace his inner music, the cello a symbol of his learning to cope with the life he never expected to lead. The lessons provide another reason to be in Calgary on weekends, which will come in handy when he agrees to co-parent the child his ex-wife and her lover are planning to have, a bittersweet irony since he cannot father a child. There's also the potential new love interest that comes almost as a reward for his reaching out to help the man who traded him the cello for the blue Volvo and inspired Joey to make this voyage.

Coyote may have revived something literature has desperately needed for a while: the truly decent hero. His gentle spirit, his inner strength and his openness in the face of pain are more than admirable, and it's easy to imagine that the world would be a better place with more Joeys in it.

Despite the role sexuality plays in *Bow Grip*, it is not about being straight or gay or any of the labels we give each other and ourselves. At its most basic, it is about re-evaluating what family means, how embracing chance can heal, and how, if we're lucky, if we stay open and refuse bitterness, the unexpected will teach us that our ability to love has no boundaries. *Since she almost failed Grade 9 band class, Joy Parks prefers her epiphanies in the form of very good chocolate.*

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