

# **The Forest Path to the Spring and October Ferry to Gabriola Short Guide**

## **The Forest Path to the Spring and October Ferry to Gabriola by Malcolm Lowry**

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# Characters

In place of the Consul and his estranged though loving wife moving toward violent death in Mexico in *Under the Volcano* (1947), Ethan and Jacqueline Llewelyn in *October Ferry to Gabriola* are about to be evicted from their British Columbia beach cabin.

Lowry intended the fear of eviction to overlie this book as he made the Consul's addiction to alcohol underlie *Under the Volcano*. The artistic problem is twofold: Llewelyn is a flawed figure from the start. He has been fleeing ghosts, real and imagined, all his life.

The real business of "the book is the charting of inner flights.

Ethan Llewelyn clearly qualifies as a Lowryan persona. Dispossessed of his Thoreauvian retreat, he has given up a lucrative law practice upon learning that the man he saved from the scaffold is indeed a murderer. The overt action, like that of *Under the Volcano*, takes place on a single day. It opens on an October morning. Ethan and Jacqueline are heading northward by bus from Victoria toward Nanaimo, where they will catch a ferry to Gabriola Island. The novel ends with the couple sighting the lights of Gabriola, the dreamed-of harbor apparently theirs.

But the book fails at the narrative level because Jacqueline is little more than a sycophant for Ethan. Long passages of dialogue between Ethan and Jacqueline about his retreat from law and life and about her Scottish ancestors are impossible to defend.



## Social Concerns

Late in the decade-long evolution of *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry introduced the Northern Paradise motif. He developed it during years of relative sobriety in Canada in the 1940s. It was here that Lowry for once found himself able to rise from his ritual burning in Mexico. It was in British Columbia that he evolved a separate, though related, fictional persona: that of an outsider — usually a struggling writer or musician — facing eviction from his beach refuge. It was a theme he would try to build into a Paradise to balance the Inferno of *Under the Volcano*. In the process, Lowry's concerns reached to the world outside the psyche of one rootless addict.

The fourteen years in Canada produced a brilliant novella, several outstanding stories, and an unfinished novel which, had Lowry been able to give it the nurture of *Under the Volcano*, might have produced the lyric novel he had hoped would measure up to the tragedy.

October Ferry to Gabriola goes beyond *The Forest Path to the Spring's* cameo of renewal to a rich prose lode Lowry had not mined since *Under the Volcano*.

While the novel sounds some of the same notes as *The Forest Path to the Spring*, it goes well beyond to the place where the Northern Paradise teeters toward hell. It chronicles what befalls the transcendent spirit when the threat of eviction jars the delicate balance between ecstasy and damnation. Although sadly unfinished and fated for a kind of posthumous limbo, this is the one book which showed evidence that Lowry could consolidate the gains of *Under the Volcano* and go on to new ones.



## Techniques

The Forest Path to the Spring, redemptive as nothing else in Lowry's works, contains his most poetical prose apart from the great novel. It is the seventy-page anchor work in Lowry's only collection, *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961). In it Lowry discards all ambiguity of point of view — all those shifting personae of *Under the Volcano* — for a unity of narrative stance that is without precedent in his fiction.

Although employing the "I," Lowry appears reluctant to limit his narrator to a precise identity. He is never given a name. For once here is no writer writing about the writer writing. To be sure, Lowry reveals that his narrator has been a jazz musician, to Gabriola 1503 but he is one who has given up his old life of the night.

What gives Lowry supreme control in *The Forest Path to the Spring* is that he has subjected the felt life of the protagonist to a created structure. The structure is much more than chronology; specifically, the story's eight sections swing around the cycle of the seasons.

What unifies these sections is that Lowry has waived his usual subjective strategies for those of a kind of narrative pastoral, a poem.

# Themes

Lowry's real subject is the war which Nature wins over nature, the triumph of the discovered correspondence between elemental forces, the eviction of the individual from his/her spiritual roots, and humankind's abiding but muted selflessness. His entire thrust in *The Forest Path to the Spring* is summed up by something akin to Thoreau's acknowledgement that his life before Walden had been a sham. Lowry apologizes for the "mere heroics" and "vain gestures" that have characterized his life. Yet he — Everyman — has to "go beyond remorse, beyond even contrition ... pass beyond the pride I felt in *The Forest Path to the Spring* and *October Ferry* accomplishment, and to accept myself as a fool again." The real antagonist is the world which Thoreau and Lowry would banish in the interests of discovering the self. *The Forest Path to the Spring* is the record of a quest for the buried life of the soul.

The final lines of *October Ferry to Gabriola* are redemptive. The book ends in a deluge of maritime imagery. As the ferry makes for Gabriola, the couple stand arm in arm on the deck. A lonely lighthouse blinks, silver breakers crash against the rocky shore, the "primeval island" heaves into view.

The apparent resolution is achieved stylistically, but it is as false to life as the tinkle of a toy train at Christmas.

The eviction theme has not been the tie that binds. It fails both as motif and dialectic. Lowry, whose preoccupation with the forces within a man that are bent on destroying him had no equal in modern literature, could galvanize his vision but once.



# Copyright Information

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