

Claire Wilkshire. *Maxine*. St. John's: Breakwater Books. ISBN 978-1-55081-402-6

Claire Wilkshire's first novel is about Maxine, a thirty-something woman trying to navigate early mid-life existential angst in St. John's, Newfoundland. Maxine is spurred into action by the death of a friend her own age, an event that inspires Maxine to leave her job as a communications officer and pursue her dream of writing a novel. This in itself is entirely plausible; when faced with the knowledge of our own mortality and the realization that we might be mindlessly going through our days without really experiencing our existence, we can develop a sense of urgency about the need to understand who we are and what we are doing with our lives. Maxine begins to ask herself: What if I go through life but have never really lived? What if I never pursue my dreams and run out of time? Maxine attends a seminar held by a motivational speaker and, filled with a buoyant sense of promise about the future, prepares to spend the next year of her life writing.

She becomes a writer as her novel becomes part of her daily existence. Her characters weave in and out of her consciousness with the ephemeral, elusive quality that characters have. Immersed in her creative work, she starts to inhabit the work — or perhaps it starts to inhabit her. Wilkshire accurately represents the process of writing a novel, but I began to wonder if some of Maxine's behaviour is meant to be parody. After several months of writing, with varying degrees of success, Maxine decides to commit herself to a solid five- or six-hour workday.

At the time Maxine starts writing, Kyle, the son of Maxine's intrusive, boundary-lacking neighbour Barb, begins spending time with Maxine, gradually opening up her perspective on life with his innocent, yet innately wise, presence and childlike witticisms. Eventually, near at the end of the novel, Maxine becomes Kyle's guardian after his parents are killed in a car accident. In between, Maxine ends up in Paris after receiving an e-mail about winning a prize for her novel in a competition held by a publishing company, which was sent by a publisher's employee who was suffering mental/emotional disturbances; and he compulsively sent out e-mails to three entrants saying they had won instead of notifying only the winner. While in Paris, Maxine meets Serge, a Frenchman who defies the Parisian stereotype by not being rude, but that seems to be his only quality. He ran in a recent election as a Green, but keeps this fact from her because he is afraid of what she might think for some convoluted reason that has nothing to do with her.

What started out as a reasonable premise for a novel gradually peters out into a number of subplots that do not hold together in any substantial way. The

only opportunity for real psychological growth happens at the end of the novel when Maxine becomes Kyle's guardian. Unfortunately, the novel ends at a point where a real story could begin. Very little is made of Kyle's trauma, and Maxine seems to be very much the same character she was at the beginning. Although her sojourn in Paris presented difficulties — such as not having a reserved hotel room because she was led there under false pretenses, so she had to muster the confidence to stand up for herself and demand a place to stay — there is little evidence of her development as a character. Maxine bumbles along, caught up in her own mini-dramas, and as a result we never see who she really is. Perhaps I have a bias towards characters who are deep and revelatory and have emotional complexities to contend with and unravel. Perhaps I prefer characters who suffer more than the usual existential angst of our time. In any case, I would have liked to have the opportunity to know Maxine's character better, because I am quite sure there is much more to her than what Wilkshire gives us.

Alexandra Gilbert
Memorial University of Newfoundland