

## **Review from The Dominion – News from the Grassroots**

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### ***December Book Reviews***

***by Megan Stewart***

*Having Faith* isn't about trust, belief, or religion. It's about a girl having a baby girl while in prison.

Trista is one-quarter Inuvialuit and 15 when she has Faith, a premature child who is deaf, brain-damaged and diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Born into a violent night following punches to her mother's belly and the bloody death of a store cashier, Faith spends the first three months of her life in a juvenile detention facility before being shipped south to a foster family.

Her mother spends those same months deluded, detached or drugged. As Trista gropes through her days at the Polar Girls' Prison, each brings greater loss and self-disappointment as her plans for motherhood are dashed as quickly as her approaching court sentence.

As Trista draws further into herself, novelist Cathleen With is at her best. It's unclear what Trista remembers and lets ruminate in her head and what she shares with the staff and other girls at the prison. These monologues can be disorienting, but through the course of the narration, they become more frequent, more confusing and we can appreciate Trista's own bewilderment, loneliness and longing.

The author lived and taught in Inuvik and here builds an insulated world of snow drifts, ice roads, wolf trim on parkys and the dark, northern secrets of molestation, alcoholism, gambling and neglect.

At the Writers and Readers Festival in Vancouver last year, With said she has seen girls "just go sideways."

"They would talk about their life as if it were going to be over by the time they were 30. Suicide. Drugs. Whatever. Better get on with life."

Born to a 13-year-old mother in Jackfish Bay, a remote, fictional town outside of Iqaluit, Trista inherits a world where men slip little girls fivers to get them off.

"Sometimes you don't even know what the sexual assault is," said With in Vancouver. And speaking for the young abused characters in *Having Faith*, "Oh, that happened too. Maybe that's why I can't get my shit together."

Trista's voice is urgent and desperate and sometimes buoyant. *With* opens the door for her redemption, but this novel offers little reprieve. The prose evokes cold climes, ghosts that haunt and forgive, sunless days and frozen bodies in the permafrost, but *With*'s scenes foster a sense of faith—a confidence in survival, strong women, intuition and love.

Trista inherits aspects of her grandmothers' cultural knowledge and skill—but barely. She cherishes their values and generosity, but doesn't have the social support or maturity to embrace it. *With* has surrounded Trista in female role models who flash through the narration as potential futures for the inmates at the detention facility.

*Having Faith* speaks to trust and spirit, but Trista learns it's also about having faith in family and the friends we chose as family.

*With* received acclaim for [Skids](#), a short story collection about kids living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and again in *Polar Girls*, *With* brings us a harrowing and mesmerizing voice of a young Canadian fighting to survive on the margins of society.

—Megan Stewart

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