

# A new collection of short stories adeptly showcases Maine

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By Joan  
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Some books just dare you to judge them by their covers. A new collection of short fiction from Portland-based Littoral Books is a case in point.

“North by Northeast” trades on the iconic Hitchcock movie title of similar name, while swapping west for east and heading straight up the coast. Add the strangely arresting cover image of abstract tree branches, pale green against a blue background, and you’re compelled to look inside. Even then, the book isn’t content to let the stories alone display their Maine-ness; included are intimations of place with gorgeous archetypal photos of rockweed and fog, winter whiteouts, a skeletal view of trees. There’s much to be said for book design that sets a tone, creates an ambience and provides a frame.



## Local book review

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### **“North by Northeast: New Short Fiction by Writers from Maine and New England.”**

Edited by Agnes Bushell. 170 pages, paperback. Littoral Books. \$18.95

The occasion for this book release is that 15 years have passed since poet and editor Wesley McNair compiled a similar Maine-themed anthology (“Contemporary Maine Fiction”), and the time was right. This time around, the editor is Agnes Bushell, a longtime Maine activist, writer and teacher, and part of the team, with her husband, James, and Marcia Brown, that makes up Littoral Books. One can only assume that competition for inclusion in this volume was intense, given the abundance of writerly talent in these parts and the consistently strong writing within. Bushell has chosen an eclectic batch of stories – some mainstream, some off-the-beaten-path and everything in-between.

What connects these stories are sundry links to the Pine Tree State. Often that means references to famed venues – for instance, The Holy Donut, Castle-in-the-Park, or Flagstaff Lake; in others, such as Rita J. Doucette’s “Smoke,” it’s the persistence of Maine’s legendary fog. For some, Maine is simply an author’s birthplace or current residence. The good news for readers is this broad conception casts a wide net, welcoming fiction of many stripes.

Like any good anthology, this one serves as a feeder source for future reading. By showcasing a mix of fresh and familiar names, it prompts readers to seek out more of its writers' offerings. Among the book's marquee authors, two, in particular, stand out: Joshua Bodwell weighs in with "What Is Stolen Can Never Be Returned," a gritty and poignant tale of regret, told by a lobsterman's widow. And Lewis Robinson surprises with "QE2," a darkly entertaining character study of a beloved, if disarming, old uncle on his deathbed.

Other stories of note include Robert Diamante's "Blue Eyes," which deftly captures the hesitation and spark of two middle-aged men on a first date. Jodi Paloni's evocative "Rest Stop" is a paean to the common humanity of strangers. Shirley Glubka's "Still Life with Skull" is a heart-stopping, campy tale of two old friends, once lovers, who are now rejoined in their 70s for a finale before death.

While death and its preamble are never far from a number of these stories, it's a tribute to their wide range and variety that the book is neither weighty nor glum. Indeed, some of the book's most unexpected humor can be found alongside these settings.

"North by Northeast" is a slim book with a progressive heart. Several stories reflect the sexual diversity of our time, and the ratio of authors skews heavily female. Smart, edgy and modern, this collection reflects Maine well.

*Joan Silverman's work has appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Chicago Tribune and Dallas Morning News. Her book, "Someday This Will Fit: Linked Essays, Meditations & Other Midlife Follies," was recently released by Bauhan Publishing.*

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