Rupert will appreciate the extremes of physical exertion and stamina that he demands of himself. Pete McMartin, in a recent discussion of Leighton's odyssey in the *Vancouver Sun*, questions what made him do it, but those of us who were privileged to know him in a professional capacity realize that, to him, dealing with risk was life itself.

The Spruces

Rex Holmes

Prince George: Caitlin, 1999. 192 pp. $15.95 paper.

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Set in the Peace River country of the spring, summer, and winter of 1932, Rex Holmes's novel, *The Spruces*, relates the homesteading trials of Kevin and Joanne McCormack, a young couple fleeing the urbanized distress of Toronto in search of a new beginning in north-eastern British Columbia. Inexperienced, painfully naïve, and often too prideful to either solicit or accept help, the McCormacks file for an abandoned homestead boasting a house and a spruce forest. What they find, of course, is a shack in the midst of a swamp, twenty miles from town and distant from neighbours. Fortune, however, does not abandon them entirely. They are befriended by Ed Reed, a local dray man who moves them out to the homestead; offers some practical guidance on getting started; and, in the course of the novel, lends valued assistance, wise counsel, and encouragement.

Left on their own, the McCormacks stumble through the spring and summer, slowly becoming more adept at life on the land while, at the same time, surviving near-starvation, hovering insanity, the peculiarities of a bachelor neighbour who lives in squalor, and the frenzied chatter of a neighbouring woman who craves companionship other than that of her husband and their brood of children. Winter and the hours of darkness it brings almost consume Joanne McCormick, who falls into a delirium that, in turn, tortures her husband who is at war with his own demons. The arrival of spring provides the opportunity for Kevin to strike out for town and finally ask for credit at the local store, where the proprietor begrudgingly offers charity along with a generous helping of sanctimony. Faced with the dilemma of either submitting to the merchant's dressing down or returning empty handed to his ailing wife, McCormack swallows his pride and accepts the charity.

Salvation, however, seemingly arrives in the uncollected mail that had accumulated since their arrival; for not only had McCormack's father sent a money order, but Ed Reed had left a note offering work and a cash advance. Only one day after his humiliating encounter with the local merchant, McCormack is able to triumphantly

pay off his outstanding balance and to return to the homestead well stocked with vegetables and supplies, heralding a victory, of sorts, over both the hardship of homestead life and winter. The good fortune is short-lived, and, within days of his return, both of the McCormacks are dead – she from an accidental gunshot wound at her husband's hands – he by grief-stricken suicide.

The Spruces fits neatly into the tradition of both fictional and non-fictional writing on the Peace River region of British Columbia. Holmes draws upon stock characters in the fictional construction of the Peace while relating a story that, with some variation, has been told before. Indeed, one can find in Georges Bugnet's 1935 novel, *La Foret*, a similar story of a young couple who arrive in northern Alberta only to find hardship, personal turmoil, and, in their case, tragedy in the drowning of their infant son. Or, in a similar vein, one can see the mythology of the Peace in Ralph Allen's 1958 novel *Peace River Country*, which is rooted in the appeal of a land promising peace, a second chance, but where only a chosen few attain redemption.

From a historical perspective, the familiarity of the story that Holmes relates is paradoxical. On the one hand, it is striking how often, in both fiction and non-fiction, the Peace region has provided the backdrop for similar versions of returning to the land and the promise of a better life. Too often, the fictional versions end in tragedy and defeat, with the land, weather, and wilderness overwhelming faltering human efforts. On the other hand, the actual settlement history of the region provides uncounted examples of homesteaders who, despite everything, prevailed and achieved a measure of success. Those who persevered have far outnumbered those who were driven from the land.

Ultimately, Holmes's novel is interesting and worthy of note for at least two contradictory reasons. By framing the story in the fashion he did, he provides another example of how the mythology of the Peace region did pull aspiring farmers, ranchers, and other entrepreneurs from across North America and beyond. But in having the McCormacks suffer a crushing defeat, Holmes employs an all too familiar turn of events. Indeed, to that end, it might fairly be suggested that the next novelist who embraces the lure of the Peace as an opening proposition might consider an exploration of how the vast majority of homesteaders prevailed and how the harsh realities of pursuing peace compelled them to redefine the meaning of success on this northern frontier.