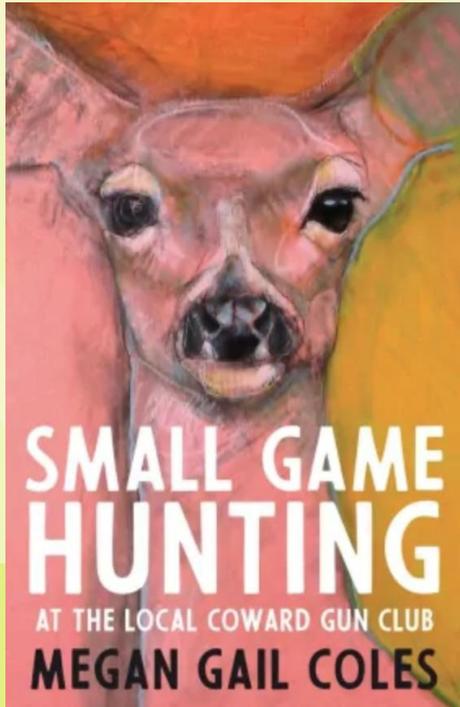


Book Background: SMALL GAME HUNTING AT THE LOCAL COWARDS GUN CLUB



Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club, Megan Gail Coles's debut novel, revolves around a cast of flawed characters who are implicated in each other's hopes, dreams and pains as they try to survive harsh economic times in Newfoundland.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* and watch Megan Gail Coles discuss her book.

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WARNING TO TEACHERS:

The novel *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* contains scenes of sexual, physical and psychological violence.

The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues such as sexual assault, post-traumatic stress disorder and personal trauma.

Please prepare your students for the content explored in the book, the book excerpt and the backgrounder. Allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.

* The author video, the book backgrounder and book excerpt available on www.curio.ca discuss the violence depicted in the novel but do not include any explicit content. We recommend that you review all video and written materials before sharing them with students.

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Book Description

Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club takes place over one day — Valentine's — as a vicious winter storm bears down on St. John's, Newfoundland. The principal characters have gathered at a trendy downtown restaurant called The Hazel, where their collective conflicts are waiting to implode.

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This 422-page novel doesn't have a lot of plot, rather it is driven by the complex and bleak inner-lives of each of the characters.

Before the novel begins, these words appear on an otherwise blank page: "This might hurt a little. Be brave."

At the centre of the story is a love triangle between Iris, the hostess at The Hazel, its womanizing celebrity chef, John, and John's snooty wife, George, who owns the restaurant. John and Iris are having an affair that George does her best to ignore and Iris knows is doomed. As John prepares the weekly staff dinner, Calvin, a regular, is getting drunk with his sociopathic best friend, Roger, who has just lost his job and is

concealing a dark secret about Calvin's twin-sister. At a table nearby, the mayor of St. John's and his poverty-bashing cronies harass their server, Iris, before meeting with George's father to close a deal with the town's richest man. Meanwhile, another server, Damian, goes out for a smoke to soothe his broken heart.

All of the book's characters are in pain, none more than Olive Noseworthy, Iris's friend and possible half-sister, whose lifetime of abuse brings her to The Hazel in a snow squall wearing a pair of chewed up ballet slippers. A few months earlier, Olive was gang-raped at a party by Roger and his coked up friends, an event Damian partially witnessed. Calvin's twin-sister, Amanda, also arrives at The Hazel

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anticipating being proposed to, but when she sees Roger, makes a scene and all three leave.

The power outage that propels the story to its climax feels inevitable and foreshadows the unnatural disaster of these tormented characters sharing space in a storm. John spontaneously makes love to George in the kitchen, sending Iris into a fury that makes their affair public. Damian is beaten to a pulp out front by a drunken Roger after he accuses him of raping Olive. George's father reveals that The Hazel is bankrupt and that he has struck a deal with the mayor to tear down heritage houses and open a brand-new casino-restaurant with John as the head chef.

Outside in the blizzard, Calvin and Roger have jumped in a truck to flee the scene of their crime. As Calvin

watches blood gush from Roger's wounded head, he is distracted from the road and hits Iris. The novel ends with Iris and Olive laying in the snow where we discover they share a father, and Iris feels a sense of regret for never having been there for Olive.

Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club tackles head-on issues of class, race, homophobia, and the grim realities of what women must sometimes do as survivors of a sexist society. Coles also calls out abusers and the men and women who enable them by standing by, forcing the reader to confront truths that have been silenced for too long. Coles is right — it might hurt a little. Be brave, indeed.

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Primary Characters

Iris – Strong, beautiful, and loud-mouthed, she is a talented artist and experienced server who is in love with her boss John. Her issues with abandonment are triggered by the fact that she knows John will not leave his wife to legitimize their affair.

Olive – Iris's troubled friend, whose life of abuse at the hands of men has left her timid and haunted by unchecked trauma. She believes Iris might be her half-sister and is hurt by her initial rejection. Regardless, they maintain a lifelong friendship.

George – The once-divorced daughter of the richest man in town, she is the stuck-up owner of The Hazel.

Her staff make fun of her behind her back and it irritates her. While she only seems to love her dogs, George is planning on adopting a child with her disloyal husband John.

John – The arrogant but charismatic chef at The Hazel. He has a pattern of lying to women and using them to get what he wants, but thinks of himself as a feminist, philanthropist, and all-around good person.

Calvin – Like many people in this story, Calvin thinks he is a good person because he doesn't participate in the worst of his friend Roger's behaviour. While he doesn't approve of Roger's deeds, he enables his friend by not intervening. He wishes his sister Amanda would stop making a big deal of the fact that Roger is a rapist.

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Damian – Unhinged and broken-hearted, Damian parties to numb the pain of losing Tom, the love of his life. Damian witnessed the aftermath of Roger and his friends gang-raping Olive at a party, but was paralyzed with indecision — when Tom finds out, he wants nothing to do with him. Damian is wracked with guilt. He wants to be a good person, but feels that he has never had anyone show him how.

Roger – Calvin’s evil friend, who has committed several acts of sexual violence. He uses the stress of being laid off to excuse his foul behaviour.

Major David – The mayor of St. John’s who is all too happy to help his rich friends and ignore the city’s most vulnerable residents. He doesn’t believe women

should be in the workplace and has designs on tearing down heritage housing to open a casino-restaurant.

Amanda – Calvin’s twin sister is an actress and activist, who is very passionate about her work. When she was 14, she was sexually assaulted by Roger.

Omi – We see little of Omi, who appears at the beginning and end of the book. A Nigerian immigrant, Omi is a kind man looking for community in Canada, but winds up in harsh St. John’s. Omi cares for Olive and looks out for her. She is quietly grateful and Omi doesn’t mind that she can’t reciprocate his kindness in full.

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Key Themes

 **CLASS and MISOGYNY** – These are the two central themes in the novel and are closely tied. In St. John's, there is an open hatred and hostility between the poor and the rich. As with many cities, the poor have been poor for generations and the rich have been rich for generations. The government props up this wealth gap, using crime and mental health as excuses to ignore the issue of poverty. Poor women are exceptionally vulnerable in this system. They are the target of male frustration, are made to feel powerless, and are largely unable to improve their circumstances, having been denigrated and run-down for so long.

 **HOMOPHOBIA** – This is a theme tied closely to class and misogyny. Gay men and women are also vulnerable in this system, the victims of violence and traditional gender roles.

 **RACISM** – This theme is touched on, primarily through Olive, who is mixed race and is frequently asked about her background. This is a traumatic question as she has been rejected outright by her father and is mostly raised in foster care. Her identity, as it is tied to her skin colour, is murky and twisted with pain.

 **SELF-DECEPTION** – This affects many characters in the novel, who believe they are good, upstanding citizens, even as they let terrible things happen to people or manipulate those they claim to love.

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About the Author

Megan Gale Coles is an author, playwright, and the executive editor of the Riddle Fence journal. She grew up in Savage Cove, Newfoundland, and currently lives in Montreal, Quebec where she is working on an

interdisciplinary PhD at Concordia University. *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* is her second book and first novel.

Short Fiction by the Author

- *Eating Habits of the Chronically Lonesome* (2014)

Plays

- *Our Eliza*
- *The Battery*
- *Bound*
- *Falling Trees*
- *Grace*
- *Squawk*



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“What recommends this novel most is the way its author stays with her characters’ hurt, how she holds it without reverence but understands how those wounds can motivate like nothing else... *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* is a dark, taut, funny novel that feels for its characters’ pain while remaining caustic toward the enablers and the kinds of violence that polite society allows.” – The Globe and Mail

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“Coles is a writer’s writer . . . The action is compacted into one day, but carries and conveys incredible personal backstory and narrative texture. Cole’s writing is agile, precise, muscular, vernacular. She invests in voice and perspective and the payoff inscribes the page. It’s poetry of a frank, rough kind: some of it is hard to read. ‘This might hurt a little,’ is Coles’ opening note. And it does. This is a dense, dark, propulsive work.” – St. John’s Telegram

“The lure of Coles’s often glorious use of language and the importance of reading books that do exactly what *Small Game Hunting* does — force the reader to face truths that have been hidden and swept away for far too long, to be made uncomfortable and prompted to think rather than be simply entertained — are reason

enough to give this up-and-coming author’s new work serious consideration.” – Quill & Quire

CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.5148307
- Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.5433794
- CBC Newfoundland: 'This might hurt,' promises Megan Gail Coles on 1st page of new novel (text): www.cbc.ca/1.5011310
- CBC Books: Megan Gail Coles debut novel explores the best and worst of Newfoundland (text + audio): www.cbc.ca/1.5293952



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- Q: Megan Gail Coles's debut novel is a tough-love letter to Newfoundland (audio): www.cbc.ca/1.5021520
- The Next Chapter: Megan Gail Coles's *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* is a tough love letter to Newfoundland (text + audio): www.cbc.ca/1.5144069
- St. John's Telegram profile (text): www.thetelegram.com/lifestyles/megan-gail-cole-s-tackles-newfoundland-and-labradors-classism-sexism-and-racism-in-debut-novel-281341/
- 49th Shelf Q&A (text): <https://49thshelf.com/Blog/2019/05/10/The-Chat-with-Megan-Gail-Coles>



Other Links

- Northern Peninsula profile (text): www.northernpen.ca/news/local/northern-peninsulas-megan-coles-discusses-road-to-artistic-success-67297/



Watch Megan Gail Coles discuss her book: www.curio.ca/canadareads

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Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Review the title of the novel. What predictions can you make about the story? How can the phrases “Small Game Hunting” and “Local Coward Gun Club” be understood at the literal and figurative levels?
2. The novel begins with a strange warning from the author, “This might hurt a bit. Be brave.” Which literary device is the author using here and what is its effect on the reader?
3. Have you ever thought of yourself in one way, but later discovered that you might be tricking yourself? Or have you seen this quality in someone in your life? What was the self-deception and how did it affect yourself and others?
4. Megan Gail Coles wrote a novel about some of the issues touching her home province of Newfoundland, such as the tension between the rich and the poor. Can you think of some of the issues in your community and how they affect people? Is there a story from your community that you feel should be told?
5. *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* is very much about its setting of

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Newfoundland; Coles even goes so far as to call her home province a character in the novel! Can a piece of literature that is so much about one distinctive place be appreciated by readers who haven't experienced it? Why or why not?

6. Read the excerpt at www.curio.ca/canadareads. What can you infer about Olive's character? How is she feeling and how does this reflect the novel's core themes?
7. What are some ways that society mistreats women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ2 community? What are the effects of this treatment?

8. Megan Gail Coles says of the novel's characters, "I have clear allegiances to some of the characters in the book (...) but even the characters that I am less aligned with, I still understand what it is they are trying for, because ultimately we are all trying for the same thing — we are all trying to find happiness." How is each character trying to find happiness in their own way?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students might look into the wealth gap between the rich and the poor in some of Canada's major cities, find data, and use graphing technology to communicate their findings.

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2. Misogyny, racism, and homophobia are three forms of discrimination Coles explores in the novel. Students might select one of these “social evils,” research a related local, national, or global issue, and present to their classmates how it affects individuals and communities.
3. Many characters in this novel believe themselves to be better people than their actions might suggest. Students might conduct some research into the psychology of self-deception and connect their findings to a figure in the news or popular culture.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

To learn more about consent, sexual assault prevention and response, see “Sam's Story: Sex Assault Survivor Speaks Out,” a video and teacher guide that is part of the News in Review series available on www.curio.ca/newsinreview.

The activity on the following pages was adapted from the “Sam’s Story” guide.

ACTIVITY: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

This activity is adapted from “Sam's Story: Sex Assault Survivor Speaks Out,” a video and guide that is part of the *News in Review* series available on www.curio.ca.

1. Your teacher will divide the class into small groups and distribute a set of fifteen terms and definitions related to the topic of sexual assault prevention and response. Your teacher will remind you that life is complex and there are myriad ways an individual or group might understand a violent, harmful, or oppressive experience. Thus, the language around these experiences is suitably complex and nuanced. Ultimately this exercise is designed to teach toward a more desirable world to live in.

With your assigned group, discuss all of the terms and definitions. When you are finished, select three terms that your group feels are most relevant for someone surviving an act of sexual violence. Share your findings with the class in an open, safe and respectful discussion.

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Term	Definition
Accountability	A willingness or obligation to claim responsibility for an act or course of action. This is frequently misunderstood to mean punishment — for example, one is “held accountable” — or that it must be achieved through a formal judgment in a dispute.
Advocacy	The act of providing private or public support for someone. This process helps identify someone’s unmet needs and supports them through the navigation of complex systems to correct an imbalance in access, mobility, and accommodation.
Bystander Intervention	A strategy to prevent violence and oppression through the engagement of individuals (or groups) willing to actively address a situation they deem problematic. Someone who performs this acknowledges a problematic situation and chooses how to respond.

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Term	Definition
Coercion	A method of control that uses pressure or manipulation to ignore or reject the needs of another person. This behavior can include subtle or overt threats, intimidation, blackmail, dishonesty, persistence, emotional withholding, etc. A person's ability to say 'yes' or 'no' is ultimately influenced by the interplay of power, identity, and privilege between those involved. When a person in a position of power exhibits this behaviour, they take advantage of their authority to achieve their desired outcome.
Consent	An ongoing physical and emotional process between people who are willing, equally free of coercion, communicating unambiguously, and sincere in their desires. This involves a mutual agreement to listen to and stay engaged with one another throughout all interactions, to respect both yourself and your partner's needs, and to understand that someone may choose to disengage from the experience at any time.

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Term	Definition
Gender-based Violence	A term used to encompass incidents of sexual and relationship violence, specifically pointing to the gendered nature of these crimes. No single gender commits all acts of violence, and no specific gender is exclusively the victim of acts of violence. However, women, LGBTQ and gender non-conforming individuals are more likely to be victims of this type of violence.
Oppression	How a dominant group of people, joined by a common identity or set of identities, benefits from unequal treatment, manifested in the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward a subordinate group.
Perpetrator	Someone who has committed an act along the spectrum of violence. Other terms used in administrative, legal, and social settings might include rapist, defendant, accused, abuser, offender and respondent. Less commonly used descriptors include stalker and harasser.
Rape	A legal term involving three elements: penetration of any orifice by any object, force or threat of force, and acting against the will of the victim. It is distinguished from an assault only in that it requires penetration.

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Term	Definition
Rape Culture	The set of deeply entrenched societal attitudes and beliefs that treat sexual violence as normal, demonstrated through media, language, and policy, promoting sexual objectification and coercion, lack of agency over one's body, and dismissal of feminine-presenting or gender non-conforming individuals as not "fully human."
Sexual Assault	A legal term referring to any unwanted sexual contact, such as fondling, groping, or penetration of any orifice by any body part or object. This concept is not related to sexual pleasure or gratification. Instead it is about the desire (conscious or otherwise) for power and control over another person.
Sexual Objectification	The practice of treating a person as an object to be consumed, placing their worth on their body and appearance. It is a tool of what many refer to as "the patriarchy," and generally impacts women more than men.

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Term	Definition
Survivor	A term that refers to anyone who has been harmed as a result of gender-based violence and has survived the incident(s). It is most often used by other survivors, advocates, counselors, and activists who support someone as they deal with the after-effects of trauma.
Transformative Justice	An alternative to the criminal justice system that seeks to alleviate harm. It attempts to account for the experiences of both victim and perpetrator, as well as the communities where the harm occurred. It is a response that understands violence as symptomatic of structural injustice while holding individuals accountable and helping communities heal.
Trauma	The experience of a deeply disturbing event. A normal response to an emotionally harmful incident or series of incidents experienced by a person or community. Most frequently we associate this response with a specific event, but it is equally important to consider the emotional impact of systemic oppression on the lives of individuals and communities.

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2. Watch the video *Tea and Consent*. The video was released by the British police in 2015 and can be found here:

www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/tea-and-consent/2016/06/10/38e3e220-2f15-11e6-b9d5-3c3063f8332c_video.html?utm_term=.20911b7fd2c8

As a class or in small groups, consider the following:

- a. Is this an effective analogy for consent? Why or why not?
- b. What factors make the concept of consent difficult for perpetrators of sexual assault and rape to understand? Why do they fail to recognize when consent is necessary?

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