"Vintage Norman." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"This quirky story deals with a powerful theme: how love endures despite our best efforts to sabotage it." — *Publishers Weekly*

"This is a beautifully written story of love gone awry, with a wonderfully drawn cast." — *Booklist*

### About the Book

Howard Norman's haunting and elegant new novel, *Devotion*, explores the intricacies of betrayal. It is a singular love story by a two-time National Book Award finalist.

The novel opens with a fight between just-wed David and his father-in-law, William, after which William stumbles into the street and is hit by a taxi. After the brawl, and as a result of the perceived infidelity that caused it, David and Maggie (William's daughter) go straight from smitten to estranged — and David, kicked out of Maggie's bed, moves in with the father-in-law he injured.

There, at the Nova Scotia estate where William serves as caretaker and swanherd, Howard Norman centers his stunningly perceptive exploration of the mysterious moments when love, lust, anger, and pride collide — and of what happens in the wake of those collisions.
Will David earn back William's trust? Will Maggie allow David back into her life? To what extent do our roots define us, and to what extent must we free ourselves from them in order to become ourselves? And ultimately, what sort of devotion does the upkeep of love — familial, romantic, or aesthetic—require?

These questions shimmer to life in Devotion, a luminous and evocative novel from an author whose work Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times has described as "bewitching . . . it glows like a night light in the reader's mind."

It will glow in yours, too.

**About the Author**

Canada's vast open spaces play a central role in Howard Norman's new novel, Devotion. They play a central role in Norman's life as well: the author spent sixteen years living and working in the Canadian arctic and subarctic regions, writing ethnographic and documentary film scripts and compiling translations of Inuit and Indian folklore and history.

Norman's unique experiences have informed his critically acclaimed writing, which has been translated into twelve languages. Two of his novels—The Northern Lights and The Bird Artist—were nominated for the National Book Award. Norman is also the author of the novels The Museum Guard and The Haunting of L, as well as numerous children's books, including Between Heaven and Earth, for which he won the School Library Journal's Book of the Year Award. Norman is a three-time winner of National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and a winner of a Lannan Award for fiction.

Norman, who has written for the New York Times Book Review, the Los Angeles Times Book Review, and National Geographic Traveler, is on the editorial staff of two prominent literary journals, Conjunctions and Ploughshares. He is on the board of directors of the PEN/Faulkner group in Washington, D.C., and PEN New York. He earned his BA from Western Michigan University's Honors College and his MA in linguistics and folklore from Indiana University. After receiving his MA, he spent three years in the Michigan Society of Fellows.

Currently, Howard Norman teaches in the University of Maryland's MFA program. He lives in Washington, D.C., and Vermont with his wife and daughter.
A Conversation with Howard Norman

*Devotion* is very much about the damaging and dislocating power of secrets, whether hidden or revealed. Was this difficult to write about?

Writing has all sorts of effects on the writer. The act of writing is by definition "autobiographical," even when the subject matter is not. During the course of writing a novel, your feelings often run the gamut: joy, doubt, becoming unhinged, pulling yourself back together. You cannot worry about that. It is part of the job description. All you can do is try to maintain the deepest possible level of engagement with the characters and the story. *Devotion* is indeed partly about secrets and, to some extent, whether or not to reveal them. It is also about unrequited love. Freud contended that to some extent all love is unrequited, even self-love! The phenomenon interests me greatly. When I was in my twenties, my thesis for a master's degree in folklore was titled "Fatal Incidents of Unrequited Love in Folktales Around the World." So that old preoccupation came back full force in *Devotion*. As Maggie's father, William, observes his daughter and son-in-law in the throes of unrequited love, he wonders at the passionate and inventive stupidities people are capable of when wounded and confused. Of course, he's wondering this about his own daughter!

In a letter, Anton Chekhov offered that all love stories — and *Devotion* is a love story — are "skewed." He meant that all courtships, all marriages, all affairs, have certain turbulences and vicissitudes. Certainly this is true of Maggie and David in *Devotion*. A friend of mine who is a splendid writer is of the opinion that in my novels, when a man and woman finally find each other, finally allow themselves to fall in love, it is often because they have exhausted all the negative possibilities. I gave this some thought, and I think my friend is right! This seems neither good nor bad; it's just the way life turns out.

Several scenes in *Devotion* are incredibly striking and haunting: the old woman driving with a swan whom she believes to be her late husband comes to mind, as does the pregnant Maggie standing outside David's window as he photographs her. Do such striking images occur to you all at once in flashes of inspiration, or do you build them slowly, from the ground up?

Years ago I was invited to the Hay-On-Wye festival of books in Wales, and in a nearby village I saw a woman drive past with a swan in the back seat. Perhaps she was taking it to a veterinarian, I don't know. Some years later I discovered a postcard with that same image, though it wasn't the same woman and swan. But the image stuck with me. Including it in *Devotion* was a matter of timing. David and Maggie are on their whirlwind honeymoon in the Hebrides when they see a woman drive past with a swan in her car. Their waitress tells them that the woman believes the swan is her reincarnated husband. Months later, when Maggie and David are terribly estranged, Maggie writes him a letter saying that the old woman's devotion to her husband, even in the afterlife, is the kind she hopes to have from David. So much of *Devotion* is about constructing indelible images that both haunt and soothe the soul, sometimes all at once. On an estate in Nova Scotia, as David photographs Maggie through a rainy window, he is literally starting a family album, pictures that will tell a story of that difficult but hopeful time in their marriage. However, I wanted that tableau to leave clear images in the reader's mind.
Every writer works and thinks in different ways. I honestly cannot say that images often arrive in a "flash of inspiration." For me, it is a matter of slow deliberation. I take a long, long time in writing and rewriting, sculpting a scene, and I have to trust that my own devotion to careful and methodical thinking may have good results.

This is the first novel you've written that is not in the first person. Why the change?

I choose a point of view to create the strongest sense of intimacy with the lives of my characters. In Devotion, I felt that the third person best served this philosophy. All through the writing of this novel, I listened to Bach's compositions for unaccompanied cello, performed by the genius Janos Starker. That was my musical accompaniment. Bach's compositions for cello have always struck me as both pointillist and impressionistic, that is, emotionally detailed and providing broad sweeps of feeling, sometimes within the same passage. This was instructive, and in a way I tried to do the same thing with writing. It turns out that writing in the third person can exact as deep an emotional price as writing in the first person. I was grateful for this knowledge. I had simply never tried it.

In Devotion, when David and his father-in-law, William, come to some sort of truce with each other, they see a flock of wild swans glide to a landing on a pond. William is suddenly inspired to tell a heartbreaking story about a local skywriter and his unrequited love for his high school sweetheart. Though this occurs late in the novel, it serves as a kind of centerpiece, illustrating again the woeful and comical extremes of behavior to which love can take the average person. Is this story of the skywriter—whose name in Devotion is John Pallismore — true?

Absolutely. You see, for about ten years, while traveling and living in Nova Scotia, always with a novelist's eavesdropping ear, I searched for the most uncanny examples of unrequited love I could find. And then in 1999, in the village of Parrsboro along the Bay of Fundy, I heard a story I simply could not get out of my mind. I put it pretty much whole cloth into Devotion. In part it is the story of a skywriter who scrawled in beautiful cursive lettering a plaintive and desperate declaration of his long-harbored love for his high school sweetheart, Ellen. He'd been hired by Ellen's husband to write a "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" message in the sky and sign it with the husband's name, of course. But this John Pallismore couldn't help himself and signed it "LOVE, JOHN." That led to all sorts of complications, which I talk about in Devotion.

What is your favorite part of the writing process?

Writing is, to put it simply, the end result of thinking narratively, of constantly calibrating which overheard stories, or things you just make up, might fit into a novel. It is an obsessive habit and a great sustenance. But here's another thing: I heard on NPR that the sound of a manual typewriter has been included in an archive of "obsolete" sounds, sounds relegated to posterity. Well, it is not obsolete in my house! I write letters on my old Royal manual every single day, and also write first drafts — even second and third drafts — on that old machine. This is not any sentimental, curmudgeonly stance in the
least; working on a manual typewriter keeps me anchored. My daughter reminds me that it is the sound she heard throughout her childhood; that is enough right there to keep me attached to it. In *Devotion*, when David must write a very difficult letter, he uses a manual typewriter in his London apartment.

**The landscape of Nova Scotia has such a powerful presence in *Devotion*. How did the time you've spent in Canada influence the novel's tone and structure as well as the story's trajectory?**

I set all or part of my last two novels in Nova Scotia. *Devotion* is the third. So you can see a deepening engagement with the province. Even when I'm at my Vermont farmhouse, Nova Scotia remains a preoccupation. It is the place I prefer my imagination to reside. A landscape can be summoned forth, as in a séance. For me, Nova Scotia always has a vivid immediacy. Its weather, its history, its folklore, the way people talk — all of it is of great interest. Everything I love most happens every day there. One of my favorite writers, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, asked, "What good is intelligence is you cannot discover a useful melancholy?" I often think melancholy is the intensifying element of my novels, so setting them in melancholy Nova Scotia is useful to me as a writer. It is a place where humor and sadness are earned in equal measure. Nova Scotia is well met with my nature. In a novel I try to develop landscape the same way I would develop a human character, with all its complications and contradictions, moods and emotions — its daily life.
How to talk about the universe full of words that make you clever without using the clever words? Popular right now: “50 years of ebooks” most interesting facts from history March 29, 2021. “The best Kindle Unlimited books to read in 2021” by category March 11, 2021. Some illustrators made the book a part of their identity. The strongest element in book-related illustrations is the idea. A powerful, genuinely simple, and insightful when it comes to describing how books and reading influence our lives. You have read a book you care about, some part of it is always with you. Literature is the most agreeable way of ignoring life. Malcolm X. not that I don’t like people. It’s just that when I’m in the company of others even my nearest and dearest there always comes a moment when I’d rather be reading a book. Maureen Corrigan. Books to the ceiling, Books to the sky, My pile of books is a mile high. love the smell of book ink in the morning. Umberto Eco. Rainy days should be spent at home with a cup of tea and a good book. Bill Patterson. It is is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially. Quotes About Reading. Writing comes from reading, and reading is the finest teacher of how to write. Annie Proulx. The best part about books is that there are various types of books. One can read any type to gain different types of knowledge. Reading must be done by people of all ages. It not only widens our thinking but also enhances our vocabulary. Different Genres of Books. We can pick any book of our interest to expand our knowledge and enjoy the reading experience. Firstly, we have travel books, which tell us about the experience of various travelers. They introduce us to different places in the world without moving from our place. A book is a set of printed sheets of paper held together between two covers. The sheets of paper are usually covered with a text, language and illustrations. The book is a more flexible format than the earlier idea of the scroll. The change from scrolls to books began in the Roman Empire, and took many centuries to become complete. A writer of a book is called an author. Someone who draws pictures in a book is called an illustrator. Books can have more than one author or illustrator.