

FROM SATURDAY'S BOOKS SECTION

Diplomatically speaking, this novel's good

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Colin McAdam's second novel, *Fall*, is, among other things, the latest chapter in postmodern literature's fascination with the breeding grounds of the rich and powerful.

The book is set at a tony Ottawa boarding school 12 years in the past, and the subject matter conjures up ghosts of other novels with similar, rarefied settings and, to a lesser extent, plots.

There's a smattering of *Lord of the Flies*, more than a touch of *A Separate Peace* and an undercurrent of *Catcher in the Rye*. McAdam writes for adults, not youth, but the often stream-of-consciousness style of this coming-of-age story is easily on a par with these classics — though the plot itself will probably not prove to be as memorable.



Fall, by Colin McAdam,
Hamish Hamilton Canada,
368 pages \$32

We see the world of St. Ebury from two perspectives. One belongs to Noel Reece, son of a Canadian diplomat, and the other to his roommate, Julius, son of the U.S. ambassador to Canada, a charming, handsome young man with a head full of fluff.

Occasionally, we are also treated to the world according to William, the U.S. ambassador's driver, whose worldly voice forms a pleasant counterpoint to Julius's babbling and Noel's brooding, but otherwise doesn't help move things along.

The story is sometimes told to us by a now-30-year-old Noel who, for some reason that is never made clear, has chosen this particular moment to look back on things. Despite this vague motivation, we

are engrossed by the action for the better part of the book. Noel is nicknamed Wink, the result of a lazy eye, and though he is quiet and retiring, by the time we meet him he has overcome his nerdiness enough to have built up a set of heroic muscles. These are duly respected by the other boys, including the popular Julius, whose willingness to be friendly takes Noel by surprise, especially when he suggests they start washing each other's backs every night.

Julius is everything Noel is not, in mostly predictable ways, and his desire to share his feelings about his girlfriend, Fall (short for Fallon), is flattering. When Julius takes the rap for dumping a trash can full of soda pop on a sleeping student, a prank Noel was in on, he is "gated," or confined to the dorms, for weeks, while Noel remains free. Noel is then tasked with delivering notes to the beautiful Fall, with whom he becomes infatuated.

At this point, the plot seems to form the apex of a triangle rather than a graceful arc. Something bad happens to one of the characters, and now our story starts to resemble Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Motivations shift, the denouement begins and we can predict, with disappointing accuracy, not only what happened — which is never shown, only hinted at — but what will happen.

Not that McAdam's work is derivative. He is too intelligent a writer for that, and his perspective on the human situation is incisive and innovative. Yet he eventually becomes more interested in parsing the thoughts of his most complex character than in giving us a great story. Many readers will not have an issue with this, since his psychological dissection is skillful. But once I passed a certain point, it was not the plot, but the dialogue (which is by turns hilarious and poignant, and always spot-on) and the characters (fully fledged, multidimensional beings) that kept me turning the pages.

Colin McAdam is a product of the world he writes about. The son of a diplomat, he grew up in Hong Kong, England, Barbados and Denmark, and attended Ottawa's prestigious Ashbury College. It's this background that allows him to capture with such devastating accuracy the sights, sounds and smells of life in a dorm with a bunch of hormonal adolescents.

He also shows us how the simple boredom of the young elite can turn into jadedness, and perhaps something even more dangerous, given the right circumstances: a casual loathing for the bourgeoisie, a history of social stigmatization and the emotional devastation of being sent away from home too soon.

McAdam pursues interesting literary techniques here, making frequent switches in time as well as points of view, but thanks to his undeniable talent, we are engaged, rather than confused, by this.

Despite the success of his first novel, *Some Great Thing*, McAdam has apparently managed to escape that most dread disease, Second Novel Syndrome, the symptoms of which are extreme self-consciousness and over-inflated prose. Heralded as one of Canada's most interesting new writers — despite the fact that he is really a citizen of the world — with *Fall*, McAdam takes us on a journey worth making.

William Kowalski's feature film script, Lovely to the Last, co-written with director Markus Griesshammer, will be produced this year. He is at work on his fifth novel.

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