

The Lay of the Land

Two decades after 'Spartina,' John Casey revisits his fictional seaside town in Rhode Island's South County.

BY DOMINIQUE BROWNING

WHERE are we? Answers drift across the woods and salt marshes in John Casey's beautiful, elegiac new novel. One person after another takes a bearing, sets a course, loses the way, makes a correction.

"Compass Rose" is the story of a handful of people who live in a small coastal community in Rhode Island's South County. Yet this bit of a world is complete unto itself, with its own force fields, its own variations off true north, its own ways of tilting into alignment. Like the love affair that is the novel's magnetic pole, "Compass Rose" gathers its quiet strength from

although "Compass Rose" stands on its own, I recommend reading the two novels back to back. "Spartina" is Dick's story, the tale of a man more comfortable at sea than on land, a man who builds a boat strong and nimble enough to ride out a lethal hurricane. In "Compass Rose," it's the landbound women who drive the story.

Elsie's friend Mary, "busting into every life but her own," is a gifted cook, comfortable in the heat and bustle of a kitchen. Mary moves in with Elsie to help raise her daughter, and she is the friend to whom Rose turns when her relationship with her

the mercy of unhappiness." It is May who takes the biggest risk, opening her heart to Rose, welcoming her to her household.

All around them, the natural order of things in South County is being upended. Fisheries are collapsing; land has more value as real estate than pasture. The disruptions of class snobbery have snaked their way into a place where creeks and ponds bear the names of families now barely able to hold on to their patch of earth. It's a world divided between people like Elsie, who raise their children "so they can go anywhere," and those like

suffers a stroke, it is the decay of language that most unhinges her. She dreams that death is the loss of grammar and convinces herself that when she is able to get out of bed and move around her grasp of prepositions will improve. Her hope is that Elsie will become "a more reflective tutelary spirit," just as she herself has been South County's conscience, its memory. "You can be a better form of what I have tried to be," Miss Perry tells her. "If I had to say in a single phrase what my life has been, it is this—a love affair with this small piece of rock-strewn woods and ponds, and the people who truly live in it."

Casey's portrayal of that patch of South County is carefully observed, lovingly rendered and delicately parsed—a full-throated celebration of the natural world. For Elsie, "any patch of ground was web upon web of awareness." When she is in the swamp, she knows "more than she could name," a state of being that is a prelude to coming into grace. In one scene I'll think about for some time to come, Elsie watches a blacksnake climb the "soot-gray bark" of a tall black locust to reach a hole in the trunk where birds have nested. A bluebird flutters nearby in a "mother frenzy," chirping frantically but ineffectually as the snake slithers into the nest, six inches of its tail hanging out. Elsie climbs the tree, clutching a flashlight, and finds the snake with "two tiny claws sticking out of its mouth. The snake rippled, and the claws moved an inch farther into the gape." She sees a bulge in the snake, and the tiny motion of one last featherless nestling still alive at the back of the hole. The snake isn't evil; it's just doing what

COMPASS ROSE

By John Casey.
356 pp. Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.95.

a slow accretion of instants of intimacy "both ferocious and -serene," moments that bubble up, collapse and decompose in the natural order of things, on their way to becoming the history of a place.

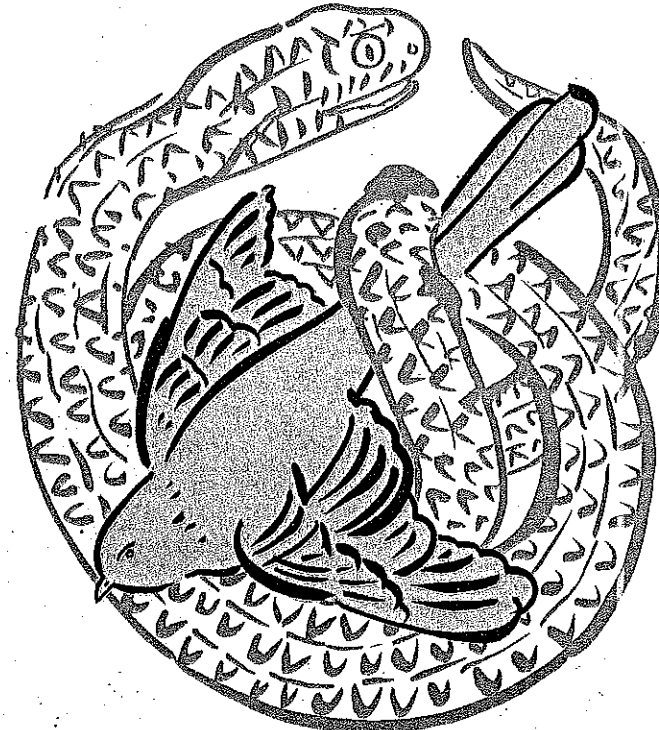
It is useless and truly beside the point, in a book of such compacted sweep, to condense the plot. Events are not what drive this narrative; people are. As in all lives, important things happen, as do banal things. Money, power, nature, lust and greed exert an irresistible pull. Trouble rises up, disturbs and dislocates, and then everything settles down.

"Compass Rose" continues a story that Casey began in "Spartina" just over 20 years ago. The setting is "a tiny ecosystem," complains the angry, adolescent Rose of the new novel's title. Her mother, Elsie, is a single woman who secretly, willfully became pregnant during an affair with a struggling fisherman named Dick, a married father whom she wanted "for the certainty of his fierce instincts." But when Dick first lays eyes on his infant daughter, whose paternity is at that point still a secret, he becomes unsettled, unsure of where he is. Quietly, deliberately, he backs off, recalibrates.

Elsie is a natural resources officer for the state, "the warden of the Great Swamp," as her friends joke. Possessed of a primal sense of the rhythms of life and death, she has "the righteousness of being one of those who knew that order." This affinity is something she shares with Dick; in fact, it is "the innermost justifying of her love." They remain apart, yet they constantly pull toward each other. "You're here. You're part of here," Dick tells her. "We're part of here."

Their affair began in "Spartina," and

Dominique Browning, the author of the memoir "Slow Love," writes a column for the Environmental Defense Fund and blogs at SlowLoveLife.com.



The novel hinges on two love affairs, one illicit and one with a piece of rock-strewn woods and ponds.

snakes do. Life will be renewed. "But what she had seen—the slow swallowing of flesh and bones, the peristalsis she'd only read about and imagined in pale abstraction—now it was hers."

The compass rose is an ancient and beautiful figure that marks the angular differences between cardinal and magnetic directions, north, south, east and west. Theoretically, the compass rose is now embedded in almost all navigational systems—it locates us. Any seafarer knows constantly to ask the question, "Where am I?" To ignore the answer is to put one's life at peril. But this question is also urgent for anyone trying to chart a course through daily life. We need our inner compasses: where you are is who you are. Long after reading the last pages of "Compass Rose," I'm still thinking about how we establish ourselves as one another's magnetic directions—and hold fast. □

mother becomes brutally fractious. Dick's wife, May, is estranged by her husband's affair, but even more so by his inability to understand or appreciate her. During dinner, he looks at her "from far away, the table's length like a stretch of water between them." May is a homemaker, the parent who principally raised their two sons. Struggling to forgive her husband, she feels desperately alone: "Dick had a whole stretch of sea to roam around in, . . . and she hadn't gone very far from where she started, just stayed at home. Imagining her life becoming bigger made her dizzy. But at the same time she felt less at

Dick and May, who intend to stay for generations more.

One of the novel's loveliest, most prickly characters is Miss Perry, the grande dame of South County, a founder of the private academy Elsie attended—and the Latin teacher who introduced her to the beauty and mysteries of nature. Now, though, it's hard for Miss Perry to move through the world; even an outing to a baseball game is a victory. Slipping into a fragile old age, "she found herself staring at things, simultaneously puzzled by how particular a leaf was and how unbordered and vague she herself was becoming." When Miss Perry