John Vanderslice teaches writing in the master of fine arts program at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, where he's also one of the editors of *Toad Suck Review*. His new book *Island Fog* (Lavender Ink, $17.95), a collection of thematically connected short stories set on Nantucket Island, deserves more space and consideration than I can provide here, but the alternative would be to ignore a worthy, haunting book.

The first half ("King Philip's War") is composed of stories that take place from 1795 to 1920, while the second ("Island Fog") is made of more contemporary pieces, set mostly in the 2000s.

It's the historical-feeling fiction of the first half that affected me deepest. The first story, "Guilty Look," considers an actual bank robbery that took place on the island in 1795 and establishes a tone of apartness from the rest of America that carries through to the final pages. I haven't been to Nantucket as an adult, so I can't vouch for the accuracy of this vision of the island as a kind of gray-market American frontier, but Vanderslice's characters are credibly human and humane. The opening story that unfolds of the unjustly accused William Pease -- a Congregationalist suspected of abetting the robbery by an opportunistic Quaker oligarch -- might resonate with those who worry about the slide toward theocracy.

In "On Cherry Street," set in 1837, a woman whose seafaring husband hasn't been heard from in three years declares herself a widow and finds controversy and recompense in the decision. A little later on, we meet a retired sea captain who has, of necessity, acquired a shamefully exotic taste. (A rare but not exactly unknown preference, if we're to believe Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* or Benjamin Morrell's possibly dubious 1832 memoir *Narrative of Four Voyages.*)

In the second half, Nantucket has been reduced from a nation-state to a tourist trap and playground for the rich, a place where ghosts are still palpable and certain American resentments have taken root. The titular final story, of novella length, flirts with magical realism as its protagonist Doug, having flunked out of the University of Massachusetts, repairs to the island for a summer job, his "future draped before him like an island fog: dank, listless and inscrutable."

You might come to this collection thinking it a specialty work made up of little stories that appeared in little magazines. But there is an uncommon power to this collection, which feels a good deal more potent than the sum of its parts. Vanderslice's Nantucket is -- like Spoon River or Winesburg or Yoknapatawpha -- a remarkable place.

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*Style on 09/28/2014*

*Print Headline: McEwan's Children Act pleasant but too simplistic*