Publisher revives Ruth Moore's honest portrayals of Maine island life

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By Ray Routhier

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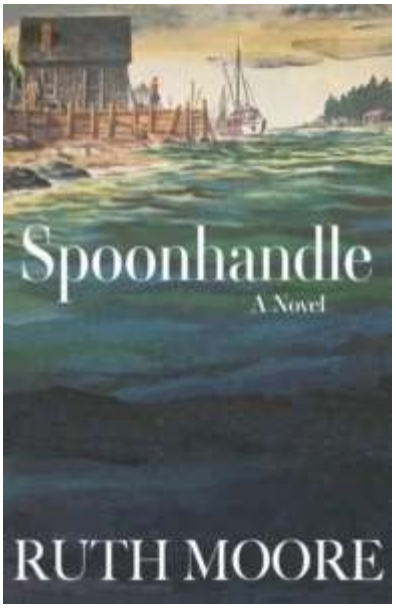
Ruth Moore was not interested in a Hollywood version of life on Maine's islands, but Hollywood was certainly interested in her.



Ruth Moore's second novel, "Spoonhandle," was a New York Times bestseller and was made into a Hollywood movie. *Photo courtesy of Islandport Press*

Moore, who grew up on Great Gott Island near Acadia National Park, was a New York Times best-selling author, beginning in the 1940s. Her second novel, "Spoonhandle," was so popular and compelling that 20th Century Fox made a major film based on it called "Deep Waters," starring some of the day's best-known actors, including Dana Andrews and Jean Peters.

But Hollywood didn't get Moore's story about the drama and details of small-town life in a Maine fishing village right, in her opinion. She hated the film and would have nothing to do with it. But the money she made helped her to a buy a house in Bass Harbor on Mount Desert Island, a place where she wrote for the next several decades. Born in 1903, she wrote 14 novels and died in 1989.

Moore, who shunned the spotlight, is not as well-known as some Maine authors of the past, but just as important, many students of Maine literature say. Her books are not always easy to find; some have gone out of print. But Yarmouth-based publisher Islandport Press is reintroducing Moore's novels to audiences by reissuing editions of several of her books. New editions of her first novel, "The Weir," and of "Spoonhandle" went on sale in the fall, while versions of "Candlemas Bay" and "A Fair Wind Home" will be released by the end of this year. Islandport this year will also release a collection of Moore's writings called "Voices Off the Ocean," which will feature excerpts from Moore's novels, ballads and poetry.

"When I first discovered Ruth's writing, in the 1970s, she seemed to me to be the most honest fiction voice about Maine I'd ever read. She sounded like my grandfather," said Gary Lawless, 69, a Belfast native and longtime co-owner of Gulf of Maine Books in Brunswick. "Her views of Maine life were not romanticized. She writes about the little things that turn into bigger things when you live on an island, like how the people divide when a new church opens or what happens when someone gets a new furnace. Or about high school basketball."

Moore's niece, Emily Trask-Eaton of Waldoboro, said the family is "delighted" that Islandport Press editor-in-chief Dean Lunt is publishing new editions of her aunt's work and introducing them to new audiences. Trask-Eaton said that in later years, her aunt was a fan of the writing Carolyn Chute, author of the 1985 novel "The Beans of Egypt, Maine," who had a similarly unsentimental view of small-town Maine life and an honesty in character portrayals.

She said she feels that some younger readers might find her aunt's books dated, and might stumble over some of the authentic period Maine dialect. But she thinks the themes of Moore's stories will still resonate.

"She dealt with what life was like living on a Maine island, with summer people coming in, with the loss of land with discrimination," said Eaton-Trask, 74. "She was very direct and honest."

Islandport Press of Yarmouth has begun re-issuing novels by Maine author Ruth Moore
Photo courtesy of Islandport Press

ISLAND LIFE, MAINLAND CONNECTIONS

Moore grew up on Great Gott Island, off the southern end of Mount Desert Island, at a time when it still had a small year-round population as well as summer residents. Today, the small island has only the latter.

Moore's father ran a store and the island post office and did some fishing as well, Eaton-Trask said. Growing up, she worked at a family-run boarding house for summer guests and, over the years, became friendly with people from all over the U.S., including writers, who were discovering Maine as a desirable summer retreat.

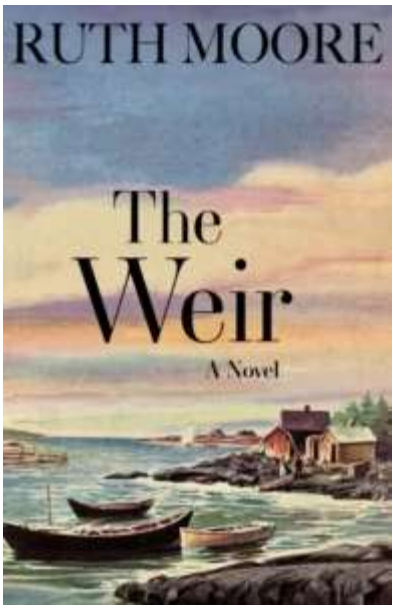
Moore had always written while growing up on the island but, after going to high school in Ellsworth, decided study to become a teacher at the State Teacher's College in Albany, New York. After graduating, she taught for a year and "hated it," according to her niece. She then got a job working as a secretary to Mary White Ovington, one of the founders of the NAACP, whose family had summered on Great Gott. She traveled through the South and helped investigate cases of Black men who were proven to have been wrongly convicted of murder. A few years later, she landed job working as editor, secretary and publicity writer for novelist Alice Tisdale Hobart. She began writing her first novel, "The Weir" while working for Hobart in California in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She later worked at Reader's Digest, condensing other people's novels.

"I think condensing other people's novels was a skill that came in handy when writing her own novels, because she knew what was important and what was fluff," said Lawless, who knew Moore when she was alive and republished some of her books through his publishing

company, Blackberry Books.

Great Gott Island, near Mount Desert Island, where author Ruth Moore grew up. *Photo by Dean Lunt/Islandport Press*

"The Weir," published in 1943, was a critically acclaimed novel about the drama of life in a Maine fishing village in the 1930s, including feuds, gossip and the struggle to earn a living and maintain a way of life amid a changing world. Her second book, "Spoonhandle," published in 1946, was also critically acclaimed and went on to become a New York Times best-seller. It deals with similar island issues as well, such as wealthy summer people looking to buy up island property. Reviewers compared Moore to William Faulkner and John Steinbeck for her honest, unflinching portrayals of specific places and their people.



Ruth Moore's first novel, in 1943, was "The Weir," about life in a small island fishing village. *Photo courtesy of Islandport Press*

When "Spoonhandle" was first being made into a movie, Moore worked on the script. But she didn't like a lot of the changes and lack of attention to detail, her niece said, including dressing fishermen more like department store models, so she discontinued her involvement with the film. Though the details weren't right, the location was. The movie was shot in Maine, at various coastal and island locations.

After buying land and building a house in Bass Harbor, she continued to write. She lived there with Eleanor Mayo, another Maine-born novelist. Moore also took up the piano in her 50s and was an avid gardener, her niece said. By the 1980s, some of her novels had fallen out of print, and that's when Lawless became interested in reprinting some of them. He said interest in Moore picked up in the 1990s when colleges started including her works in Maine literature courses. He said he never did "big press runs" of Moore's books.

"I think when some of her books went out of print, she just felt like things were over," Lawless said of Moore's view of her waning popularity as an author later in life. "But she never wanted the spotlight, she didn't want to do newspaper interviews or radio interviews."

Lunt, at Islandport Press, knew of Moore all his life. He grew up on nearby island, in the town of Frenchboro, and had sailed past Great Gott Island many times. In his 20 years of running Islandport Press, he's sought to bring attention to Maine authors and Maine stories,

so republishing Moore's novels made perfect sense. After talking to Lawless last year, he began making plans to secure publishing rights from Moore's estate and republish her work.

Lunt said Islandport plans to reprint two more Moore books in 2022 and another two in 2023.

The new versions of the "The Weir" and "Spoonhandle" are on sale for $17.95 on the Islandport Press website and amazon.com, as well as in stores.

"She was well-known for her authentic portrayal of the islands and the people of Maine, and we're always looking for people like that," said Lunt, 54. "There are some great books about Maine that have fallen away over the year, that are just really good. And her books are really good."

Ruth Moore, a best-selling author of the mid-20th century, wrote about Maine island life.
Photo courtesy of Islandport Press

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