



## Alone in the Classroom

by Elizabeth Hay  
(MacLehose Press,  
£8.99)

Acclaimed Canadian novelist Elizabeth Hay has opted for a difficult narrative strategy by having her narrator, Anne, tell not only her own story but, additionally, that of her aunt Connie, a teacher in rural Canada before the war. For a good stretch this has the effect of distancing the book's action somewhat; the reader has to accept Anne's privileged knowledge of her aunt's world, before she herself was born, when Parley Burns, Connie's charismatic but unsettling headmaster, put on a production of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in the school and deeply disturbing events rocked more than one community where he held sway. Hay's risky strategy pays off in spades as her slow-burning story arc reaches its zenith and Connie's past links up with Anne's present to become a highly nuanced history of a whole family. The echoes of Hardy's writing and of his life give the novel touches of an almost gothic darkness while the character of Michael Graves, who mesmerises both Anne and Connie, is most beguilingly and brilliantly imagined, springing memorably to life. **Jane Housham**

