Katherine Govier’s The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel now has a cozy home on my shelf of high country treasures alongside Ben Gadd’s field guides and Sid Marty’s poems and stories.

At 480 pages The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel is an epic of literary fiction that
ranges over a hundred years from 1911 to 2011, telling the intergenerational saga of the Mariner family who are linked through the Three Sisters Hotel and the main character, outfitter Herbie Wishart. Banff and Canmore become the fictional town of Gateway and Govier adroitly compresses the complex sociologies and histories of the eastern entrance to Banff National Park. Govier evokes the necessary orneriness of those who explore and live in the high country, like the novel’s protagonist Herbie Wishart, who live pitted against the elements and the precariousness of survival.

Govier’s research is impeccable. Her Pity Plains, for example, based on Kootenay
Plains, captures the Plains’ spirit: a remote montane, the backcountry guides’ cabins, their dirt floors, the white dust of glacial flour on pale grass, blistering heat, numbing cold and the jade hue of glacier-fed rivers. How weather in the high mountain chutes can turn from rain to snow and block a trail or hide a crevasse.

Govier’s fictional landscape stretches west from Seebe through Canmore, Banff and Lake Louise over the Great Divide towards the Burgess Shale and east past Bow Glacier and the Dolomite towards Kootenay Plains, west of Nordegg. The novel is an amiable trail ride, with side trips into history and Stoney-Nakoda legends, in the good company of guides, scientists and horse
wranglers, dilettantes and debutantes, interned prisoners, military personnel, coal miners and a host of immigrant settlers. Govier captures the intrigue and adventure that drew people a hundred years ago and continues to draw them today.

The novel is rich with plots and sub-plots: a disastrous trip searching for fossils; the discovery of a lost and ancient path to Pity Plains and a bear encounter. Another sub-plot reveals how the parks almost didn’t come about and a woman’s role in their existence. The intertwined stories are reminiscent of Faulkner’s Snopes’ trilogy, where the sociology and taboos of the changing times defines characters’ mores. Govier relates how a mother’s war-time
dalliance results in an abandoned child who reappears later in life to her family’s initial dismay. It’s a story intimately conveyed using the events of WWII and its effects on distant Gateway.

Govier’s earlier novel Between Men, about the murder of a Blackfoot woman in 1889, has recently earned a place among the books that define Calgary. The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel I think is deserving of standing among those that chronicle the eastern Rockies. While Govier’s mountains are a central character, it’s her portraiture of people, and especially families and strong women, which makes this a standout amongst the mountain books I’ve read. Legendary mountain men are the stuff of
lore, but Govier’s stories of unacclaimed women linger long after the campfire embers cease.