

# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT I OWE TO STORIES



My first introduction to Alaska was through a story.

When I was six, my aunt gave me a children's picture book about the Serum Run to Nome. It inspired me to line up all the footstools in front of our big recliner in my East Coast living room, thereby making a dog team and sled. I spent many happy hours riding the recliner and shouting commands to my footstools.

When I was in my mid-twenties, I picked up a paperback of John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* at a flea market. The old man behind the table asked if I'd been to Alaska. I was amused. Who had ever actually been to Alaska? Nobody I knew. It turned out that he had been stationed there during World War II. He always wanted to return, but never made it. "Go now," he urged, "before you get too old." He talked me out of buying the Muir book because he said it was worn and ugly. "Come back next week and I might have something for you."

I was curious enough to go back. As soon as he saw me, he pointed to a cardboard box. Inside was a ten-volume first edition of Muir's complete works bound in fawn-colored leather with the titles stamped in gold. Each volume was illustrated with hand-painted watercolors and the first volume had Muir's autograph on the frontispiece. The only books of comparable quality that I had ever seen were locked behind mesh screens in the Rare Books Room at the Boston Public Library. I could keep the books, he said, for an indefinite loan.

As soon as I finished the *Travels in Alaska* volume, I passed it on to my husband. We were living in San Francisco at the time and he was completing his medical residency. He read the book and then showed me an ad in a medical journal: "Doctor wanted. Fairbanks, Alaska." He was kidding of course. Or was he? We had just migrated from the East

Coast to the West Coast and were already too far from home as far as our families were concerned. The Bay Area offered mild weather, natural beauty, and a rich cultural environment. Still, the ad stuck in our minds. We decided Alaska might be fun for a year.

Twenty-eight years later, we still live in Fairbanks in the landlocked Interior of the state, hundreds of miles from Muir's majestic coastal mountains. We don't even own one dog let alone a dog team, but I still credit the picture book and Muir's *Travels in Alaska* with laying the groundwork for our decision to move to Alaska. Stories linked to a place with mythic overtones resonate deep in the unconscious.

In Jungian psychology, north is the direction of the unknown. That makes it both dangerous and thrilling. Outcasts are banished to the North, but if they are willing to die to their old selves and re-create themselves anew, the North offers redemption. If they are poor, they can get rich (fur, gold, oil, fast-food franchises). If they are weak, the North offers ordeals for strength training and character building.

In cultures that depend on the weather and on the movements of animals, stories are more than entertainment. They convey vital information. In oral traditions, like those of many Alaska Natives, a story is told to a particular audience for a particular purpose. It might warn, or comfort, or instruct a young person in the proper method of hunting. In an oral tradition, each telling of a story is a dynamic exchange between the storyteller and the listener.

Two years ago when I began writing a newspaper column on Alaska writers, I realized that I was not well informed about Alaskan literature. Carolyn Kremers, who was teaching "Literature of Alaska and the Yukon Territory" at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, was kind enough to loan me books by Alaskan writers from her personal library and to suggest writers I might consider for my columns.

In July 2004, Carolyn and I did a two-week backpacking trip in Gates of the Arctic National Park as members of the first "Artists in Residence" program sponsored by the park service. When we got together to plan the food for the trip, I observed the careful way she counted and recounted the Pilot crackers. She had a mathematical approach for determining the proper amount of food—so many grams for each of us per day—while I was more of an "eyeball" cook. ("That

looks like about the right amount. Toss it in.”) Our reading styles were similar to our trip-planning styles. Where I was spontaneous, she was deliberate. I immediately loved a piece of writing or hated it. Carolyn took her time before deciding, but once she’d made up her mind, she was sure of her reasons. She waged a well-planned, unrelenting campaign to convince me to include Native stories in their original languages. I introduced her to a few writers, like Arlitia Jones and Phoebe Newman. In the end we educated each other.

We began by looking at as many anthologies of Alaskan writing as we could find. That exercise made me despair. What could we possibly assemble that would say something about Alaska that hadn’t already been said?

As soon as I started reading the first chapter of Seth Kantner’s novel *Ordinary Wolves*, I knew that my misgivings were unfounded. Here was a writer giving voice to a reality I never knew existed. Kantner, who grew up in a sod house on the tundra, tells his story from the point of view of a child with the same background. *Ordinary Wolves* proved to me that there was uncharted territory left to explore in Alaskan writing.

Once Carolyn and I started reading, the stacks of books we had to consider seemed overwhelming. In the end, however, deciding on the final selections was easy. We simply chose what we could not bear to leave out. I was pleased that so many poets made the final cut. Their voices are fresh and vital, worthy of a wider audience.

After we had our pile of final choices, we looked them over to see what themes they suggested to us. We were intrigued to find that a good number were by children of people who came to Alaska with a dream. What does Alaska look like to these “Children of Dreamers”? The selections in “Taking Risks, Confronting Consequences” explore why people take risks when the consequences could be fatal. In “Transformations,” storytellers play at shape-shifting. “Naming and Unnaming” examines the compulsion to name. “Finding Self and Spirit” contains tales of inner journeys. “Feminine and Masculine Unbound” looks at gender roles in Alaska where survival sometimes offers unique opportunities to break out of stereotypes.

## THE ALASKA READER

“Alaska as a Parable for the Future” poses the question: If the Circumpolar North proves to be the canary in the mine for changes brought about by global warming, how will the people of Alaska cope with those changes? Who will be the heroes in this new, frontline struggle?

I have always been impressed at the range of skills possessed by Alaskans. My neighbor can mend a fence, fix a generator, sing a complicated aria, worm a dog. One of my husband’s patients, an old miner, demanded to watch while a pacemaker was inserted into his chest because he wanted to know how to take out “the goll darn thing” if he ever decided he no longer wanted to avail himself of its services. Looking over the writers represented in this anthology, I see hunters, trappers, teachers, pilots, scientists, fishermen and fisherwomen, a stone mason, a sled builder, a former governor, a meat cutter. If I were marooned in a one-room cabin for a whole winter, I would choose these people to be with me, not only because they could keep the fire going and put food on the table, but also because they could sustain my soul. If, come spring, the river in front of the cabin suddenly opened, I’d have no qualms about climbing into a leaky rowboat with these writers. Not only would they have the skills to keep the boat afloat, they would have the experience—and vision—to give me hope no matter how close we were to sinking. These writers have rich lives full of real adventures. I’d follow them anywhere. I hope this anthology will lead you to journey farther with these extraordinary people.

*Anne Hanley*

Alaska State Writer Laureate 2002–2004