



Bear Down, Bear North: Alaska Stories

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In her debut collection, Melinda Moustakis brings to life a rough-and-tumble family of Alaskan homesteaders through a series of linked stories. Born in Alaska herself to a family with a homesteading legacy, Moustakis examines the near-mythological accounts of the Alaskan wilderness that are her inheritance and probes the question of what it means to live up to larger-than-life expectations for toughness and survival.

The characters in *Bear Down, Bear North* are salt-tongued fishermen, fisherwomen, and hunters, scrappy storytellers who put themselves in the path of destruction—sometimes a harsh snowstorm, sometimes each other—and live to tell the tale. While backtrolling for kings on the Kenai River or filleting the catch of the Halibut Hellion with marvelous speed, these characters recount the gamble they took that didn't pay off, or they expound on how not only does Uncle Too-Soon need a girlfriend, the whole state of Alaska needs a girlfriend. A story like “The Mannequin at Soldotna” takes snapshots: a doctor tends to an injured fisherman, a man covets another man’s green fishing lure, a girl is found in the river with a bullet in her head. Another story offers an easy moment with a difficult mother, when she reaches out to touch a breaching whale.

This is a book about taking a fishhook in the eye, about drinking cranberry juice and Jippers and smoking Big-Z cigars. This is a book about the one good joke, or the one night lit up with stars, that might get you through the winter.

Bear Down, Bear North: Alaska Stories Details

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From Reader Review Bear Down, Bear North: Alaska Stories for online ebook

Lindsay says

Quite staggering, these stories. I loved how most of them connected to one another; I loved the Alaskan setting for all its grit and independence; and most of all, I loved the crazy strong women, for all their flaws. Perfect reading for an icy weekend.

Read Harder: Collection of stories by a woman

Zinta says

It's been many years, too many, since I set foot in Alaska, but opening the pages of Melinda Moustakis' debut collection of character-linked Alaskan stories brought me back instantly into that stunningly wild and beautiful landscape. Bear Down, Bear North is a series of vignettes about life in Alaska, some as short as a few sentences, written in resonant and poetic language. Poetic, yet not flowery. This is the poetry of northern wilderness, sparse, even cruel in its precision, yet breathtaking.

Consider the opening lines of the vignette titled "Trigger":

"You were conceived on a hunting stand, they say.

"Which means: We had no other place.

"The homestead is full of my mother's siblings. On the stove, a pot of potato chow big enough to feed twenty. See my mother, back roughed against the wooden platform in the trees. See my father, finger on the trigger—in case.

"You have to gut a moose right away, they say, or the meat rots in its skin.

"Which means: We couldn't keep our hands off each other."

And so, before you've even properly stepped over the threshold to enter this world Moustakis has word-painted, you are already catching your breath, spanning the horizon, perhaps looking for an exit in case of sudden danger, but more likely, a shadowy corner so you can stay as long as possible, surveying the scene of these hardened and colorful characters. Your eye lands on one wonder after another, and from these, you draw your story.

Moustakis writes in second person. She addresses you, wrapping you inside her main character so that lines blur, so that the effect of the surroundings is that much more immediate. Not many can pull that off. Second person is a literary least favorite stance, left for the highly skilled, and Moustakis is that.

With each vignette, both place and person is brought to harsh life. You begin as a little girl, but already schooled in survival. We're not talking pigtails. This is a family, three generations, of Alaskan homesteaders,

of fishermen and fisherwomen, trappers and hunters. Your mother smokes a Big-Z cigar to keep the mosquitoes away while fishing. Your brother shoots himself in the chest after too many swigs on the vodka bottle. Your daughter has perfect aim. Even the fish in these vignettes speak to you, so alive, so red, so struggling against the elements.

“The days are long and thin. The salmon keep to the shallows near rotting trees. With reaching fingers, the Kenai tugs at their tails, drawing them to the channel. The salmon wrestle the water, tap their last beats of blood and when the river wins, they drift and fodder downstream. Their bodies are carried, broken, and fed to the currents.”

Which, above, is an entire vignette, titled “Run.” The beauty of these short pieces is beyond argument; the danger, which may indeed add to the beauty, is that Moustakis has dared to write by using words and lines and language in almost equal leverage to the space between. The space between leaves room for the reader to consider the story, and there are times that this technique can leave one feeling a bit stranded, disconnected, carried away by the current. At times, I lost my thread, wondering even if I was reading about animal or human—who was this? In what role? Yet that same current would pull me irresistibly forward, and I very nearly didn’t care if I knew or not. Just wanted more.

It is such literary artistry that will put Moustakis quickly on the literary map, outline her name in stars, bullet it as a name to be watched closely. It may also keep her from bestselling tables for the mainstream reader who seeks a more traditional storyline. I would hope that particular seduction will fall flat for the author. She is a trailblazer, a unique voice, a literary leader. I suspect she writes as she writes because all else, anything less daring, would be impossible to her.

For those who hold fine literature in high esteem, Melinda Moustakis is indeed a name to watch. She’s not just going places. She is already there.

Bear Down, Bear North won the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction. Moustakis was also recently named in the “5 Under 35” authors of 2011 by the National Book Foundation. She is a visiting assistant professor at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Jess says

Strengths:

I’ve always had a soft spot for really good short stories; they’re like perfect espresso: potent, deeply satisfying, an experience you want to draw out, to linger over, to appreciate. There’s so much humanity and emotion packed into a tight form, you’re left with a feeling of potential, like you’ve been offered a glimpse of something, but there are layers on layers that remain unwritten. Moustakis’ stories touch on this soft spot. The book brings you into the lives of a series of linked characters in the Alaskan wilderness. Her writing mirrors her characters and the landscape: sparing to the point of being harsh at times. But it also has lyrical moments, especially when describing the internal emotional life of her characters. These women are complex: sad, strong, nurturing, rugged. There’s a deep vulnerability to all of them; even amidst cursing and knives and alcohol and tragedy, they love and are loved and are therefore human. The prose style is full of forward movement, verbs catapult you forward into the icy Alaskan wilderness. It is unpretentious, neither shying away, nor gratuitous with the vernacular of her subjects.

Weaknesses:

It would be difficult for me to pinpoint serious weaknesses in this work. The only criticism might be that the male characters seemed underdeveloped in comparison with the women, but I'm not sure that wasn't intentional. The men almost fade into the landscape and their wives, sisters, mothers, companions, lovers adapt and react around them.

Overall Literary Merit:

This was a beautiful book that I found difficult to put down. The emotion and connection I felt to it is just as strong flipping through the book again nearly a month after my first read-through – one of my favorites in the past year.

Tom Bensley says

Amazing is right. Maybe fucking incredibly, oh-my-godly, one-of-a-kindly amazing is a little more exact. I bought this book because I saw that it won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction fairly recently, and I figured O'Connor's name wouldn't be attached to any award that just got slapped on any old thing. But I also bought it because I don't know anything about Alaska, just that it's up the top of the US, it's very cold, and that there are grizzly bears up there. Rather than read a geography book or a bunch of Wikipedia pages, I usually opt for fiction to teach me about the places in the world I've never been to, so I read Melinda Moustakis's *Bear Down, Bear North*.

It's listed as a collection of short stories, but I think it works in many ways like a novel, maybe an unfinished one. Each of the stories is set in Alaska (usually in Soldotna or nearby, close to the Kenai river), and each of them reveals a bit about the private life of an Alaskan family, taking place in several different time periods and telling of different generations. It felt a little like a (very experimental) novel to me because everything in here is linked, whether thematically or to the narrative, and reading the book feels like discovering more about an incredible, typically Alaskan (maybe) and totally bizarre (to me) but utterly real, family.

Moustakis's characters are tough. They work, they drink, they fish. They talk when they feel like it. And usually when they talk, they tell stories. It's hard to tell whether Alaska attracts folk already like this, or the land itself is so intrusive on the lives of the folk who live up there, they get turned this way, turned into "Alaskan bush". Like Jack, Gracie's brother:

"He is five years older than you, married with kids. One of the reasons your out here fishing is your sister-in-law, Jean. She wants you to talk to him about his drinking and calls you two, three times a day at Fred Meyer where you work as a grocery clerk. He's always been extreme, but she says he's just taken out a second life insurance policy." P.18.

All Jack wants to do is fish on the Kenai river, drink, and build up his reputation as a man who fishes and drinks, by telling (often fabricated) stories about his time alone, out on a boat on the river. But Jack has a wife and kids, and a sister named Gracie ("you", in the story), who's the only one that can pick him up when he's drunk so he doesn't freeze to death in the snow, drag him home and let him sleep it off, before he gets up and does it all over again.

But it's not all fishing and drinking. If Alaska breeds tough cookies, it's because there's work to be done. It's work that reads like torture to me, but it's just life for the Alaskans:

"We made piles and piles. For days all we did was shovel up rocks. I remember looking up at the sky and it was going to storm. There was lightening flashing in the distance. I told the big man up there – you take lightening to that branch above me and send it crashing down, knock me out, because I'm not doing this anymore. But he didn't listen. All he gave me was some pittering rain. So I went behind the shed, raised the pickax, took it to my foot. I sat on the porch in a bandage – no more rocks." P.48

Moustakis's prose shifts like this, from blunt to poetic, to shocking, to strange, back to blunt (usually when one of the characters opens their mouth). The hard living in the cold climate is delivered in unflinching prose, as though Moustakis knows that her non-Alaskan audience might be baffled by the lifestyle, but at the same time she refuses to hold back, or to even explain sometimes what the hell she, or her characters, are talking about. I could've done with a fishing dictionary beside me when I was reading this. But part of not knowing and not having anything explained to me gave the feeling of being like a tourist in Moustakis's life. I was learning what it might feel like to be somewhere so "opposite" to the life I lived growing up.

Anyway, this review wouldn't be complete without a point about the animals. Wild life is truly wild in *Bear Down, Bear North*. Grizzly bears come up close and personal. Dogs track through the snow and drag sleds, better transport than any machine could handle in the snowy terrain. And the Kenai, running through the stories like an artery through the body, is packed with exotic fish, big fish and fish that die when the water in the Kenai gets even a little sick. And of course, where there are fish there are fishermen and fisherwomen, and where there are animals, there are hunters:

"The bull strides a short distance through the trees and collapses on its front legs, buckles to the ground face first, snow flying around him. He raises his head, struggles for footing, and falls again. Ruby holds onto the sled, ready if the barking dogs lunge and try to go after the wounded animal. Confident in his one shot, the man stands up. He approaches the sled with the rifle pointed at the snow, pats Orca on the head. The dogs, all at once, stop howling." P.92

Goddamn. Read this book. Moustakis is a monster talent and I will bet she will be sticking around for a long time, even if this is the only book she writes. To Melinda Moustakis and to anyone who reads this review I'll say the thing her characters are so fond of saying:

"Fish On!"

Shan says

Melinda Moustakis was named one of this year's 5 Under 35 by the National Book Foundation, and for good reason -- these stories are swell. I'm pretty fond of interconnected short stories, and I like how these take place over a number of decades so that you get a sense of how the characters' lives progress, how their difficult childhoods (cold and hunger and grizzly bears, abusive fathers, distant mothers) shape the adults and parents they become.

Janine says

I'm speechless and in awe. Just: go. Read these stories.

This collection was the perfect companion for the long bleak nights in front of the woodstove. I loved it for capturing the nuance of Alaska, which oftentimes is more an idea than a state. I will certainly be reading these stories again. And again.

Susy says

I ordered this book as a gift for my sister who lived in Fairbanks for 4 years and because we both are drawn to the Alaskan experience. What I hoped for was linked short stories that wax eloquent about how the environment and the largesse of Alaska can be so addicting. What I got was a bit more of the gritty hard scrabble life that is also very much the Alaska experience. This is not to say that I didn't enjoy this book because I did; my fear is that my sister will not.....but I'm going to risk giving her the chance to make the decision herself.

The people who choose to live in Alaska intrigue me; my relatives who call it home are amazing in their resiliency of the weather and their love for their home state. I am glad they do because it affords me the chance to visit it in all seasons but always to be a guest.

Casey says

Bear Down, Bear North, Melinda Moustakis's 2010 Flannery O'Connor Award winning debut is formally inventive, yet, as the subtitle "Alaska Stories" suggests, strongly rooted in place. I've read previous Flannery O'Connor Award winners, and I've yet to be disappointed, but I have to admit, it was Moustakis's focus on place that really drew me to the collection.

I've read quite a few place-based collections and novels recently, and the more I think about how writers develop a strong sense of place, or even what it means for a collection to be "place-based" or "regional," the more difficult it is to come up with a workable definition. However, I think what makes Moustakis's collection distinctly place-based, is not just that the stories take place in Alaska, a terrain not well covered by contemporary literature, but because the characters and situations she creates are unique to Alaska. What I mean is that her characters act and react the way they do because they are from a distinct place. Had they come from somewhere else, they wouldn't be who they are. The place, and their experiences in it, shapes who they are. Moustakis's characters could exist somewhere else, but something essential about them would have to change. It's hard to pinpoint this exactly, but I think after taking in the collection as a whole, one gets the sense that these characters are as unique as the Alaska they call home.

In Bear Down, Bear North, Moustakis plays with the form in many of her stories. When I saw that the collection opened with a flash piece, "Trigger," I wasn't all that excited. I wondered why a writer would begin her relationship with the reader with a piece of flash fiction. Then I read the story and realized exactly why Moustakis opened the collection with "Trigger" - it's a damn good story, and it provides a perfect opening, thematically and stylistically, for the collection. "The Mannequin in Soldotna," a story about how a doctor places fishhooks in a mannequin in the places where her patients have been hooked, is a fractured narrative that is sectioned off with different subheadings. It takes some getting used to, but Moustakis uses a similar structure in "This One Isn't Going to be Afraid," "They Find the Drowned," and most effectively, I

think, in "The Last Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show."

Even in Moustakis's more "traditionally" structured stories, she uses page breaks to signify jumps in time or to switch points of view. This certainly isn't anything new but Moustakis has a deft hand at this and pretty much everything she does in this collection.

The collection is linked by two story lines - the first begins with "The Weight of You," and through the course of "Miners and Trappers" and "The Last Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show," follows siblings Gracie and Jack and their respective families and how they've come to deal with Jack's drinking and erratic behavior. Each of these stories is told in the second person from Gracie's point of view. Sometimes the second person can feel gimmicky, but in this case I think it works wonderfully.

The second storyline, what could be arguably the "main" story line because of it contains more stories, deals with an extended family through two generations, and begins in "Us Kids," a story told from a first person plural narrator, and continues through "This One Isn't Going to be Afraid," "Point MacKenzie," a story told from multiple points of view, each child from "Us Kids" getting a chance to narrate, even Rais, who is deaf and mute, and Kitty, who is only a toddler, "Bite," "Some Other Animal," a story about Kitty's daughter dog sitting for a couple who owns a team of malamutes, and ends with "What You Can Endure," a story about the daughter of one of the children in "Us Kids" told in fragments that mirror the daughter's fragmented knowledge about her mother's childhood. It's an excellent story with an image at the end that truly resonates - I'm still thinking about it.

If I had to find something to critique about this collection it would be that Moustakis falls back on a similar fractured/sectioned structure in one too many stories. I think it works wonderfully in nearly every story but "They Find the Drowned." In this one, the structure didn't seem to be in service of the story. This was the weakest story in the collection for me, and I think the structure didn't help.

Of course, I have no idea what other collections were up for the Flannery O'Connor Award last year, but after reading Bear Down, Bear North, it's no wonder it won. This is up there with the best collections I've read so far this year. Truly great short stories.

For more, see my blog: <http://thestoryisthecure.blogspot.com/>

Grady McCallie says

These short stories, mostly focused on families living hardscrabble lives in rural Alaska, are accomplished. Several experiment with form, sharing a series of vignettes with linked themes, building to greater meanings ('The Mannequin in Soldotna', 'They Find the Drowned'). The stories of family dysfunction reminded me of Faulkner's stories of poor whites in Yoknapatawpha County - brooding or sometimes explicit violence, oppressive relationships, material want, and a literary style that relies on the reader to tune in and pick up some key details by inference. The stories about Polar Bear's family in particular reminded me of 'As I Lay Dying'. I see why this collection won the Flannery O'Connor award when it was published, but I also found several of the stories in the middle of the collection hard to relate to, and was more appalled than moved to empathy by the plight of their characters. Favorite stories include the micro-fiction, 'Trigger', about conception; 'Miners and Trappers', about a complicated brother-sister relationship; 'Mr. Fur Face Needs a Girlfriend' about a drifter on a fishing boat; and especially the vignette-formed stories mentioned above.

Chris Blocker says

Bear Down, Bear North is a masterfully written collection of stories. Melinda Moustakis shows off her prowess of voice and perspective. These stories, which are connected to one another in person and place, are written in first person (both singular and plural), third person, and even (thrice) second person. Moustakis is able to write in each of these and through the eyes of each of her characters with smooth precision. While some of the perspectives are jarring, as a reader, to step into, they are done with great skill. Moustakis understands the voice of these characters and does her best to deliver them in a way the reader will understand.

The overall feel of each story is poetic. The language is sparse and musical, but the book's poetic nature does not end there. There is a resonance that reminds the reader of poetry. These pieces are economical, with every word chosen carefully; they paint a picture, not so much a story, that leaves the reader with thoughts and emotions, but little plot to hold onto.

Despite the book's poeticism and Moustakis' smooth style, these stories are gritty. You'll walk away with a feeling that there is dirt grinding away at your teeth. You'll check your fingernails for grime. You'll want to trample on the carcass of a dead animal, strip naked, and pray that the rain will come and drench your miserable soul. Part of you may wish you were in Alaska, roughing it yourself, but what would be the need? Moustakis has already taken you there.

Jake Doyle says

I had the great pleasure of having the opportunity to listen to Melinda read a few stories from *Bear Down, Bear North* live. What a great observation seeing her read her stories made each sentence and detail jump off the page even more than it did when I read it myself. I had the pleasure of meeting her after. What a wonderful person with so much passion for writing and her homeland. The book holds such a fantastic series of short stories, I put it up there with a book like *The Things They Carried*. Melinda writes with such authenticity, originality and sheer passion. *Bear Down, Bear North* shows the struggles of life in Alaska, and what their escapes are from these. Each of her characters walk right off the page, they're so developed through her natural dialogue and clever descriptiveness. I cannot wait for Melinda's next novel or series of short stories. So much potential!

Tuck says

very nice, atmospheric and straightforward short stories set in the shores mostly of alaska. fun characters, gritty 'real-life' work and situations, nice tensions, and not ALL about bears. author was picked by national book award 2011 as one of 5 under 35 to be read and celebrated. <http://www.nationalbook.org/5under35....>

excellent short stories.

Mick says

This book is unreal. It took me a little while to get into it, but as the stories connected and wove together, I couldn't put it down. I am in awe of writers who can craft a good short story; it takes such skill and precision. There is a lot going on here, but for me, this is a book about strong, determined women swimming upstream. Moustakis' writing is painfully beautiful, profound, and magical. This reminds me a bit of Erdrich, but if I'm honest, I like it more.

I'm sad this is over. I want more Gracie and I want more Colleen.

Melanie Ullrich says

Although this book had a gritty feel to it which I usually enjoy in Southern grit novels, I couldn't get into the Alaskan culture. The stories and characters felt quite literally cold. The one story that really stuck out for me though was "The Mannequin in Soldotna". I laughed out loud about the concept of a doctor's office having a mannequin with all the fishing lures that patients have had removed from their bodies. Great story!

Josh Fish says

Extremely well crafted. Oh how I admire Moustakis and her craftiness. There are short shorts, collage, so many perspectives. All kinds of perspectives. One story has the perspective of like twenty people. And she can juxtapose like a ninja. She's an educated writer. But, I found, after reading the book that I didn't experience anything except writing structures. The characters were flat. The situations were unrealistic. The themes, unrealized. I know I am just a lonely graduate student but after seeing these flaws I was astounded that this book won the Flannery O'Connor award. It made me think, "what is the literary community valuing these days?" To, me a piece of literature should say something deep and profound about the human condition. It should make me, the reader, experience strongly and I should feel and understand something more than when I started. This book didn't make me do that. I feel like the institutionalization of creative writing has changed how a lot of us read. We are all reading for craft, for technique that we can point to that tells us, "that's good writing." But really, good writing, or at least good fiction, to me, is good story, complex characters, brutal and searing honesty from someone who's spend a lot of time thinking and experiencing deeply and can convey that experience as directly as possible. I am going to take a step back and stop reading like a writer, for craft, but read like a reader again.
