

fortunate to be in the North where life has to be lived to the fullest because if you stop, you freeze.

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*The Man Who Swam with Beavers* by Nancy Lord. St. Paul, MN: Coffee House Press, 2001. 256pp. ISBN 1-566-89-110-8 (pb), \$14.95 US. Reviewed by Eric Heyne.

Over the last decade Nancy Lord has been quietly building a reputation as one of the best prose writers in Alaska. Her last two books—*Fishcamp* (1997) and *Green Alaska* (1999), both nonfiction—were engaging, authentic evocations of life on and near the water in south-central Alaska. In *The Man Who Swam with Beavers* she returns to fiction, to the brief, quirky portraits of *The Compass Inside Ourselves* (1984) and *Survival* (1991), but with a twist. As she says in her acknowledgments, “This work of fiction was largely inspired by the titles and themes of stories belonging to Native Americans, particularly Alaska’s Athabaskans.” The title story is an obvious example, about a “city man, a little fat,” a grown-up version of “the child who colored within the lines,” who after walking away from his empty life “came to live . . . on a pile of logs and sticks in a lake, with beavers.” Eventually he goes all the way, in the kind of transformation common in Native American literature but generally relegated to the lower-status realm of fantasy over the last few centuries of western literature. The style and attention to details of this story are unmistakable modern and western, but Lord is reaching out in a serious attempt at cross-cultural fertilization. The point of the story, it seems to me, is to imagine a world in which a man might find himself at home with beavers, a more fluid world than most of us live in, and then to let that act of imagination serve as a lever to pry open our closed worlds.

Some of the stories are funny, and not all of them have Native roots. “Recall of the Wild” is a twist on the Jack London novel, about a modern Buck-the-wolf-dog living comfortably in an Anchorage subdivision and occasionally sneaking away to devour someone’s pet rabbit or dachshund. “The Woman Who Would Marry a Bear” takes off from a story common to many northwest coast cultures, but focuses mainly on the bride’s elaborate wedding plans; in the end the befuddled bear flees and “The wedding was quietly called off.” Other stories are completely serious, such as “The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese,” in which the protagonist must wrestle with puberty and the death of her mother. The mix of tones, like the mix of cultures, keeps the reader off balance in a very satisfying way.

Clearly part of the appeal for Lord of writing fiction is the freedom it gives her to be other people, to imagine their very different lives from the

inside out. The central characters in Lord's stories run the gamut of age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and even species: in addition to the dog in "Recall of the Wild" and the bear-groom in "The Woman Who Would Marry a Bear," we get God-as-narrator in "Behold," a story about a crew of fundamentalist American fishermen who wander into Soviet waters in 1984 and are released from a farcical incarceration in the mistaken belief that they have converted their translator. Several of the human narrators either are crazy or appear crazy because they reject mainstream American values, and one virtue of those particular stories is that they make us think about the difference between the two. While there are plenty of happy endings, there is no sentimentality or political correctness. One of Lord's point-of-view characters is an Athabaskan woman whose half-white son has become a Native activist: "Frank always said, Native people know how to keep in balance with the environment, but she thought Native people would shoot the last whale just as surely as they'd drink themselves to death, and she didn't know whose fault any of that was." Fault, of course, is not the point.

As brief and character-driven as Lord's stories are, they also exhibit the same broad sense of history and culture that informs her nonfiction. The former crusading journalist in the last story almost gives up on connecting with her grandson, whose values are everything she has fought against all her life, but ends up meeting him halfway, concluding that she can "remake the world . . . one thought and one action at a time" by being open to change. Lord's writing invites us to look very closely at both natural and human-made aspects of our world, and to think in fresh ways about what endures and what can be remade.

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*Lost Girls* by Andrew Pyper. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1999. 349pp. ISBN 0-00-648076-4 (pb), \$18.95. Reviewed by Jerome Stueart.

Andrew Pyper's first novel, *Lost Girls*, is a fair thriller set in northern Ontario. It deftly blends together genres of mystery and horror with a literary style that explores character as much as it unfolds plot. I can't say enough good things about novels that are seeking to bridge the gulf between the "literary" novels that we are told are good for us—like vitamins and vegetables, but where little happens—and "genre" fiction where everything happens, quickly and dramatically, but few characters are explored. A great cheer goes up