

of the 20th Century, *Haa Aaní* should serve the Native peoples of Southeast Alaska for many more years in this new edition.

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*The Spruces* by Rex Holmes. Prince George, British Columbia: Caitlin Press, 1999. 192 pp., ISBN0-920576-79-6 (pb). \$15.95 CDN. Reviewed by Steve Roe.

In her essay "True North," Margaret Atwood discusses a cautionary motif in northern stories, noting that "maybe it's not so good to get too close to nature." Atwood's comment wryly modifies dictums of Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality": "I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry," Frye writes, "by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature . . . . It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest." For Frye, "The vast unconsciousness of nature" denies human values, so that people must garrison themselves in tiny pockets of civilization: culture versus nature. Although such comments may sound very human-centred to those familiar with the tenets of ecological awareness, wilderness as capricious and desolate otherness haunts our national literature. In *The Spruces*, Rex Holmes gives fresh expression to a view of nature as a foreboding, deterministic presence.

Holmes' novel is about two young homesteaders who travel from Toronto to the British Columbia Peace River country in Depression-era Canada. Kevin McCormack is dreamy, proud, and unknowing; Joanne, his wife, is determined, yet frail. In the amoral universe of the novel, the two are doomed from the outset, a fact made evident by the author's foreshadowing. "Barring any dirty trick of fate, I believe yez are goin' t' make a go of her," a friend promises the couple, but the antics of nearby birds cast aspersions on such leaps of faith. Tricks of fate are in the offing.

Rex Holmes has experienced the hardships of which he writes. In 1929, at the age of six, he moved with his mother, brothers, and sisters to a homestead two-and-a-half miles outside Pouce Coupe, in northeastern BC. "If you're going to be poor," his mother said, "be poor where no one can see you." Rather than clearing land and planting wheat, the family produced saw machinery and several years later moved farther into the bush southwest of Pouce. Holmes remembers being out skating with his older brother, then walking home in the near darkness of a late afternoon and sitting down to a dinner of boiled turnips. At seventeen, Holmes enlisted in the Canadian army and went overseas. In the early sixties, during a career in business, he began writing nonfictional stories about his earlier life in the Peace region. These essays were collected and published by Baxter House as *The Last Summer* (1965). Shortly thereafter, Holmes began writing

*The Spruces*, but he and his editor moved on to other things before the project was completed. In the late nineties, after thirty-odd years, the author finally undertook revisions and sent the manuscript to Caitlin Press. Now seventy-seven, he has published his first novel.

Although Holmes looks back fondly on the struggles of homesteading, the darkness of *The Spruces* is deeply ingrained in its tone and subject matter. As Kevin and Joanne prepare for and confront their first winter, they both undergo forms of depression: he is obsessively driven to cut wood while she becomes physically ill and suffers feverish nightmares. Nor do the other settlers fare much better. Old Man Fro-man, the McCormack's nearest neighbour, is prone to paranoid delusions, while the Johnstones hang on, supporting a battalion of children with reheated rabbit stew. "Jesus bless this grub," the father says. Such passages are coloured by a black humour that provides only momentary relief from the deeper psychological shadows that haunt this fictional universe.

*The Spruces* is not a flawless book. In attempts to express human emotion, the narrative voice sometimes reinscribes the awkward emotional reserve of the male protagonist: "Kevin looked down at [Joanne], saw tears of tenderness in her eyes . . . and felt a familiar spasm of tenderness tear at his chest, or his stomach, or his heart, wherever it is that emotions flourish." Elsewhere, a rare moment of passion between the couple plays on stereotypes that align Joanne with a minx-like, animal otherness: "Later in bed Joanne relented and turned to [Kevin] in sudden passion, all fierce teeth, flickering tongue and eager hands." There are, however, a greater number of beautifully written passages in the novel. On Christmas Eve, the ill-fated Kevin and Joanne stay outside after listening to the cry of a wolf:

The entire world, their entire world, was awash in moonlight so bright it made every detail stand out like carvings. But it was not the visual stimulation that was so stunning; it was the total lack of sound. It was as if the frost had stopped the motion even of the molecules, and time itself had paused. The trees stood frozen in moonlight and so, it seemed, they would stand forever.

Such mysterious, eternal stillness further diminishes the significance of the human characters, who are symbolically equivalent to the mice that scuttle across the floor of their cabin.

We are fortunate to have *The Spruces*. This novel makes a meaningful contribution to the regional literature of an area that is still defined by its pioneering past. Holmes reminds us of the dream of free land in a last, best west, and of the trials that accompanied that dream.

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