

in *Aleph-nought* about a slippage of time that leads to a national emergency, entertaining us with ironies such as “The curfew was abandoned” and “It’s certain the economy will crash, / when is difficult to pin.”

Reynolds’ playfulness not only looks forward to possible futures but also backwards to children’s literature of the past. *Self-Portrait as a One-Eyed Rat* (F. H. Varley, Lynn Valley, 1934), evokes an alcohol-soused *Wind in the Willows* and on reading the sonnet, *The Claptrap*, which brings the collection to a satisfying, smack-of-the-lips close, our reaction may well be to want our children to read and revel in it: “she squats, boulder-big, red and blister-skinned / by the algae pot”.

It is only when we have read this last poem, once, twice or several times, and shut the book that we realize we still have a pair of binoculars around our neck, that Reynolds was not just lending them to us, but has given us them to keep.

Joanna Lilley is a Whitehorse writer.

***Rock, Water, Wild: An Alaskan Life.* By Nancy Lord. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 248 pp.**

In the middle of her new memoir, *Rock, Water, Wild: An Alaskan Life*, Nancy Lord explores the ongoing debate about the future of whaling. In a mixture of reportage and first-person narrative, she provides a history of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the anti-whaling movement up to the current regulatory impasse, as well as a short description of her attendance at an IWC convention. People unfamiliar with Lord’s work and particular brand of conservationism might find her conclusions surprising: she advocates a return to whaling, saying, “Might not an acceptance of regulated, sustainable whaling crack open, not a return to the past, but future potentials?” (116). Her conclusion reveals a great deal about the evenhanded, practical, science-based approach to conservation that she often takes. Hunting whales might be intuitively anathema to the environmental community, but Lord believes that the possible results of a return to the practice—cooperation, rational management, resumption of traditional activities, an end to the perceived hegemony of wealthy nations—will serve both humans and the natural world well in future, larger settings.

Tellingly, the chapter on whaling is titled “The Conservationist as Wood Chopper.” As Lord explains, she takes her pragmatic approach to conservationism from Aldo Leopold, “who said the best definition of a

conservationist was written not with a pen but with an axe—‘a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop’” (109). The twenty-five essays in this collection function as passionate pleas for conservation, but that passion is balanced by the understanding that the wild and its whales, bears, birds, and bugs live on a planet they must share with humans. A managed approach to wildlife respects the human need and desire to take part in the natural world, whether for subsistence or tourism, and understands that humans can come away from the interaction with an expanded sense of both themselves and nature.

Lord’s method is to inform through stories: sojourning with moose in her backyard, visiting a valuable feeding ground for ducks threatened by a proposed road, traveling on Alaska’s ferries in search of depleted stocks of Stellar sea lions, coming to terms with the anthropomorphization of bears at a wildlife sanctuary. Some essays, especially those in the opening third, “On the Way,” describe more distinctly personal experiences—such as her motivations for eventually moving to Alaska—but even here the writing is driven by a deep sense of investigation. Lord wants to find out what it means to live the kind of life she’s chosen in the North and how she can nurture the identity that makes her want to protect that place. She strikes a thoughtful, balanced, and straightforward tone, and her writing often brings the reader along for the ride: on a boat or a trail or a raft floating down a wild river, learning as she learns. Because her experiences are so engaging, clear, and informative, the reader comes to know the subjects of the essays very well, understand her position, and more often than not sympathize with her point of view.

Lord occasionally varies her mode of writing, often to great effect. In the essay, “How to Bear Witness,” she uses the second person to take the reader on a ski trip into hibernating bear country, imploring the reader to see bears without being seen, to leave the wild *wild*. A short essay called “I Met a Man Who Has Seen the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker, and This Is What He Told Me,” recounts the sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker, which may or may not have emerged in Arkansas recently from its presumed extinction (due to habitat loss). Here Lord chooses to employ a series of descriptive paragraphs with subheadings like, “Color,” “Sound,” and “What He Missed.” This stylistic departure gives her a creative way to put the reader in the moment of discovery, a scene alive with surprise, self-doubt, and hope. The ultimate scientific question—has the ivory-billed woodpecker managed to evade extinction?—is left unanswered, as is the moral question about habitat loss and protection, perhaps because Lord understands that even the most well-reasoned, practical exhortations of

“save this, save that” are sometimes lost in the all-too-avoidable din that often envelops such issues. If humans can experience the wonder inherent in wildness firsthand, however, they might understand how much the wild contributes to a fuller human experience—a better world, a richer people.

The essay “In Our Time” finds Lord and her partner Ken visiting their more-and-more neglected fishing camp on the western side of Cook Inlet, the scene of Lord’s first book of nonfiction, *Fish Camp*. Everywhere in the woods and on the beach of the fishing community, once thriving with humans taking salmon, disorderly nature has climbed its way back over the trails, the cabins, and the fishing gear. Commercial fish processors no longer find it profitable to buy from such a remote location, so fishing is not viable as anything other than a hobby in the area, which is more or less abandoned. This turn of events could be viewed as a small triumph of the wilderness over man’s best attempts at commercial exploitation, at taming the landscape to suit our needs for fish, money, and idyllic recreation. But Lord, walking among the neglected remains of her deceased neighbour’s cabin, cannot help feeling nostalgic. “Who will love this place when we’re gone?” she asks, and “What does an emptied place, without its stories, mean to anyone—other than another piece of acreage to drill for oil or rip for coal?” (145). These questions illuminate Lord’s central theme: the value of stewardship for the wild and for humans.

For Lord, the concept of stewardship is reciprocal, and humans gain something from the exchange—no simple cry of wilderness-for-wilderness’-sake here. She claims that “A life in Alaska has left me without delusion or much sentiment” (36), but it has certainly nurtured her sense of wonder. Wonder can offer us a more purposeful, even spiritual worldview. As she says of tourists, “What matters is that they learn what’s possible, and something about beauty, and what it is to live under a mountain or by a river, in the hands of whatever giant they might imagine, and that they carry that knowledge and spirit into memory, into the rest of their lives” (36). Lord challenges readers to let wild places affect them, hoping they will in turn examine what kind of wilderness management is necessary, effective, and spiritually satisfying.

Lord moves out of Alaska in the last part of the book, “Out and Beyond,” to focus largely on global perspectives. She continues to explore her themes about people and place, while expanding the idea of that place to include the global ecosystem and the peril it faces. After visiting the Mediterranean, and chronicling the threats to its marine life, she writes, “The question I want us to ask today is not what we can get away with,

but whether we can come to a new understanding about what it means to be sustained in body and spirit, and whether we're willing to commit ourselves to life all the way around our one watery, interflowing globe" (201). Lord's passionate, unsentimental, and informative memoir explores the relationships we have with the natural world, spurring us to find a sense of personal expansiveness in the wild, and perhaps to demand policies that reflect and preserve that spiritual gift.

Brian Keenan, University of Alaska Fairbanks

***Between Fire and Water, Ice and Sky.* By Gretchen Diemer. Port Alsworth, AK: Northshore Press, 2008. 80 pp. Compact disc included.**

This collection, Diemer's first, brings a strong and mature poetic voice to greater prominence and, one hopes, a wider audience. Diemer combines a focus on rural life and natural phenomena with a repetition and juxtaposition of key images that sometimes verges on the surreal. The language of these poems is lyrical and taut. A slack spot or a false step distracts the reader here and there, but overall the power of the poems builds as one goes through the book and Diemer's repeated themes and images accrue more emotional and symbolic weight.

Many of the poems have an Alaskan setting, though there are also poems set elsewhere, and poems in which location is not specified. Diemer's background as a teacher in Noorvik, St. Paul Island, and the Matanuska-Susitna Valley is rarely if ever mentioned, but it makes her voice credible when she writes about uniquely Alaskan places and people.

The accompanying CD is in no way crucial to reading the book, but it does allow us to hear the poet's voice, and the interview with publisher and fellow poet Anne Coray provides some interesting background information. It might be especially useful as a conversation-starter for classes or book groups.

The poems are free verse, but with an obvious awareness of form. Perhaps the most characteristic poems are built of free verse tercets or couplets. Unlike many such poems, the stanzas here are usually units of thought, syntax, and rhythm, and where they are not, Diemer uses the enjambment to good effect. My only formal quibble with the poems is that they occasionally create confusion by using unclear pronouns and avoiding punctuation.