

into it and they will soon be captured by an unrelenting, compelling, and gripping account of the cultural history of this Arctic icon. That account includes a chronicle of both human arrogance and humility towards the polar bear. That initial frontispiece photo and my own memory of the Stanley Park Zoo are evocative of the arrogance. Engelhard's concluding sentences in the book are a plea for humility: "Across cultures and times, its whiteness invited projection and we eagerly saddled it with our fears, fantasies and ambitions. Like the blank spots on explorer's maps, it keeps us forever guessing its true nature. It is our chance to redeem ourselves or, at least, to face our shortcomings. Without it, the world would be less colorful, less complete."

This book is eminently readable for everyone. It is an important and vital contribution to our understanding of bears—and ourselves.

Larry Gray, Yukon College

Human Being Songs: Northern Stories. By Jean Anderson. University of Alaska Press, 2017. 136 pages. 1 line drawing.

Reviewed by Jamella Hagen

In Jean Anderson's new collection of short stories set in Alaska, the usual clichés of northern life do not appear. There are no glaciers or grizzly bears, no moose or mountaintops. Instead, the stories explore the lives of women living in Alaska's towns and cities, as they make art or make a living, fall in and out of love, commit acts of kindness or crash cars. Like Lorrie Moore's *Birds of America* and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, *Human Being Songs* introduces characters who are varied and complex. Some are likeable, some are not. I appreciate that. Anderson doesn't shy away from difficult topics, cold weather, or the complex nature of human relationships.

In "Thaw," we meet Arlys, tangled in damp sheets and hungover, processing a one-night stand with a young man as she reflects back on a tumultuous relationship and searches for meaning through painting and stories. In "The Immediate Jewel," we meet Twila, a woman who worries her daughter's voice sounds "too sweet . . . like a wild rose newly opened, wafting its heart out into the dense smoke-thickened air." As the story goes on, she recognizes her daughter's tough core,

appearing as though out of the smoke of Alaska's wildfires as she teaches her to drive circles in a parking lot.

There were moments in reading these stories where I felt the pacing lagged, or the dialogue needed strengthening, or a character's inner reflections overburdened a story. But when Anderson's prose is on, it's really on. "My mother keeps her money in a plastic baggie," the book opens. Raised by a single mother, I know all about plastic baggies, but it's not just that, it's that Anderson brings us immediately into a scene and makes things happen.

There's a directness to her writing, an honesty, that's engrossing. "We're driving through skimpy ice fog," she writes in the opening of "Power Play," "ghostly gray wisps of the stuff that hang in the air like tatters of torn gauze . . . not much traffic, and the streets of downtown Fairbanks are strung with Christmas lights." I could practically taste the exhaust fumes in the minus thirty-six-degree air, and hear music piped out of the stores. When the narrator jumps out of the frosty car to give a gallon of milk to the Occupy protesters huddled outside a wall tent, her compulsion to do something helpful, however bizarre, is both funny and poignant. "I walk right up to the stomping guy . . . 'Maybe you can use this,' I say, while the young guy smiles, nods, takes the milk in its stiff double bag and says, 'Thanks.' I know for a fact that young males drink lots of milk." It's a joke but it's also, legitimately, her response to a long conversation in the car about the injustices of the world. And as an ordinary person driving down the street with her elderly aunt and a carload of groceries, it's what she has to give. She'd like to make the world a better place. Starting with this gallon of milk. Given the expectations placed on women to nurse and care for others in various ways, many of them unpaid or underpaid, the milk is a potent metaphor.

Overall, I am rooting for this book. It is refreshing to see life in the North presented artfully in fiction, by a northern writer. Of course, while the stories in *Human Being Songs* are set in Alaska, the experiences of the characters can resonate anywhere. Residents of the Circumpolar North will recognize weather, landscape features, and quirks of northern living. But readers across the globe will find much to think about in this lively cast of characters—most of them tough women with little money to throw around, who nevertheless go after what they want in life, and sometimes get it.

Jamella Hagen, Whitehorse