

Rutting Season. By Roy Ness. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. 366 pages.

Reviewed by Gerri Brightwell

Some novels are as intricately constructed as clocks, with complex sub-plots that mesh together to move their larger stories along. Roy Ness's *Rutting Season* is a finely made example. The main storyline follows Hannah Weinberg, a prominent eco-warrior who travels to Canada's Yukon to expose the horrors of grizzly bear hunting, but who can't find her way back to camp in bad weather. She treks through the bush and comes close to dying, only to be saved by Dan McKay who's canoeing the South Macmillan River.

Their against-the-odds romance—he's a subsistence hunter and occasional hunting guide, she's a vegetarian animal rights activist—builds over the ten days it takes them to paddle to the town of Pelly Crossing, but braided into this main plot are the stories of other characters: Hannah's rich but unfaithful husband, David; Dan's young daughter, Starla, who's living with her mother, Tara, and her mother's predatory boyfriend; Tara's lawyer, Susan, as well as Susan's daughter. In addition—and this is one of the main pleasures of the novel—the characters include a wounded bear, a raven who follows Hannah and Dan downriver, various moose, and Dan's lovable dog, Raz.

The secondary plots mesh neatly with the larger story. David hires Susan's husband and daughter to take him into the bush on horseback to look for Hannah when the official search turns up no sign of her. Susan, worried that Starla is frightened of her mother's boyfriend, finds herself trying to protect the girl without overstepping her role as lawyer. Meanwhile Starla, sensing that she's in danger, tries to evade the boyfriend. Over these plot lines looms the bear—wounded early on in the novel by a careless hunter—until, towards the end of the novel, it comes raging out of the undergrowth and Hannah must quickly decide her priorities. An advantage of creating such an intricately constructed novel with multiple viewpoints is the reader seeing how cleverly all the pieces fit together, but such complex machinery can also present drawbacks. We can't help but wait for that

wounded bear we've been following to show up and attack, just as we can't help but wait for the predatory boyfriend to assault Starla. The anticipation creates a measure of predictability. With so many characters to keep track of, tension becomes further dissipated simply through our attention being scattered.

That said, the multiple viewpoint characters, especially the animals, make evident one of Ness's strengths as a writer: not only does he effectively evoke smells and sights and sounds that make the North come alive, but through animal characters he does so in refreshingly new ways. We are immersed in the experiences of the huge grizzly who eventually attacks Hannah and Dan, smelling with him the caribou remains set out by hunters to bait him, feeling his fear and confusion when he is shot, and the awful pain of his festering injury over the next few days. We follow a raven on the hunt for food and have her experiences rendered in vivid and irreverent language (she calls a grizzly "shitbear," and humans "bobbleheads"). Ness evidently knows the country he writes about, and the animals and people who live there. However, in a novel with so many points of view, not all of them feel necessary.

In the course of the novel, a number of characters are forced to confront their choices: Hannah her anti-hunting activism and her marriage, Dan his willingness to guide trophy hunters for money, Hannah's husband David his infidelities, and lawyer Susan her resistance to moving on from a marriage that seems over. The most finely nuanced personal interrogations belong to Hannah. Her evolving decisions about who she is are given more space than those of, for example, her philandering husband, who seems destined never to change. In the course of her rescue and romance, Hannah is faced with eating meat, deciding how far she will help Dan in the hunting activities so important to him and that brought him to the river in the first place, and how she will act when confronted by a dangerous bear. To complicate matters, her moral struggles aren't simply personal—she has a very public persona as an eco-warrior to take into account.

For a novel that takes the issues it examines seriously, one that feels too quickly dispensed with is ten-year-old Starla's rape. The tension that Ness creates around Starla as her mother's boyfriend circles closer is compelling; having that tension resolved through the young rape victim coming through the experience apparently largely unaffected feels unconvincing, not least because Starla also believes she has shot and killed her attacker. With so much else going on in

this novel, there doesn't seem to be space for this storyline to properly come to a conclusion. Some of the other plot lines seem tied up too neatly as well—for example, a photograph of Hannah skinning a bear, which could ruin her reputation, is rather convolutedly taken care of, and her husband seems unconcerned by her sexual relationship with Dan and even pays him for saving Hannah.

It is fitting that a novel entitled *Rutting Season* would concern itself with sexual relationships of all kinds. The story in large measure is about what compels animals (humans included) to mate, and the consequences of that compulsion. In the novel's opening chapter, Hannah is trying to ignore her rutting tent-mates and eventually leaves them to fetch water—only to become hopelessly lost; during his search for Hannah, we see how David is distracted by an attractive young woman. *Rutting Season* shows us how animals of all kinds can be driven by the overpowering urge to mate, and what it costs them. But it also portrays the gentler workings of such urges through Hannah and Dan's centre-stage romance, as well as Susan's budding relationship with an old friend who turns out, delightfully for Susan and for the reader, to be full of surprises.

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Missed Her. Ivan E. Coyote. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010. 144 pages.

Reviewed by Casie E. Cameron

The cover, a Jack Frost nipped window pane peering out on a stand of sun-drenched white spruce, sets the perfect tone for Ivan E. Coyote's fifth collection of non-fiction vignettes, *Missed Her* (2010). The melting frost on the panes obscures the view, but there are streaks of partial visibility. Like the symbolic cover, Coyote's stories offer a glimpse into some experiences of queer life in the North. Each story is told with realistic detail—one person's experience of looking for love, making art, and challenging preconceived notions of performing identity.

Coyote, a storyteller and writer originally from Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, with a cult following in Canada and the United States, weaves a web of casual readability through short personal narratives in this collection. Eighteen of the thirty were written for *Xtra!* (an online magazine published in Toronto) between 2008 and 2010, and