

*Cabin, Clearing, Forest.* By Zach Falcon. University of Alaska Press, 2015. 150 pages.

Reviewed by Hiedi Cuppage

Zach Falcon's Alaska is not the one most imagine. Rather, it's one only a former local could explore honestly. Made up of short stories set mainly in Kodiak and Juneau, with mention of Skagway, the tales are not about locals falling in love with cruise ship goers or finding the most successful gold mining claim. On the contrary, each story touches on realities of feeling trapped at home—the loneliness characters experience (especially when they are with someone), the feelings of failure, the realities of being in a place with seasonal work that is so heavily relied upon. There are no feasts of king crab; instead, people even burn the fresh caught Coho.

Each story feels plausible, like the type of newsletter a small-town citizen jokes of making for their sibling when they go away to university.

Gossip is rampant. People melt down. There's constant judgment and worry about the mundane. There's very little closure. At points, like in the final story, "Every Island Longs for the Continent—Kodiak, 1973," when a woman who just experienced a miscarriage ends up being asked to breastfeed the baby of people she's staying with, the stories can almost feel uncomfortable. There's also something incredibly special about this book, and maybe the discomfort adds to that.

Early on in "Clearing," where we meet a seemingly "normal" family, the Bowers, there's a scene where they come from their dark home and walk naked onto their yard in Kodiak, and it was hard not to get shivers with lines like, "Giving us the gift of their grief, obliging us to receive it." This happens after the father had been back home attending his mother's funeral, feeling like an outsider the entire time, and not knowing how to grapple with his own family having left versus what the occasion would have been like had he stayed with his parents and siblings. For anyone who has ever left home, this was a moment of incredible insight, because as the saying goes, once you leave home, you can never really go back.

The story "Roost" tells of a couple who made the move to Alaska for a simpler life (such is the theme of most people throughout the book). The couple once picked up a painting called "Mr. Rooster Chicken" at

a yard sale, which becomes a joke, and eventually everyone buys them rooster-themed presents, and the husband even buys real chickens so as to keep the joke alive. His wife leaves him. We've all visited homes where liking something—a rooster, a frog, Santa Claus—has obviously gone too far and you almost feel sad sitting amongst the chaos that has become part of people's everyday lives; Falcon paints this very well. While the wife said it was nothing personal in the letter explaining her intent for a divorce, you get the distinct impression that the rooster-themed home may have contributed to the downfall of their marriage.

In the story "A Beginner's Guide to Leaving Your Hometown" we meet Wade who, once tourist season is over and he has lost his girlfriend, finds himself living with a couple of friends who have it together. Wade is adamant about leaving. It never happens. His friend's reminders about his hatred for the hometown not being shared among everyone, and almost insulting, fall on deaf ears. He's convinced he'll write that novel he's been so intent on getting together. It never happens. There's still a comfort at home, even when Wade's convinced it's a terrible place to be.

The theme of leaving is intertwined with every story and character in *Cabin, Clearing, Forest* and becomes very relatable in "Knots Pull Against Themselves," a story about two very different brothers, Jake and Marty, who have moments anyone who has ever had a sibling can relate to. Marty just wants to get out of Alaska. Life hasn't been what he's wanted and so he's convinced a move to Maine will change his life, but "Instead, as time wore on, he found himself feeling like a wharf rat who had mistakenly made it past the metal disk. A fraud. His roommate was a rich boy from Choate who dressed like an Alaskan fisherman, laughed at Marty's collection of argyle, and casually mentioned books that Marty was embarrassed to admit he hadn't even heard of" (136–137). Sometimes the only place you feel at home is where you are convinced you feel most miserable. The fact is, that misery is caused by not accepting that you belong there too.

This may be fiction but it feels like the reality of many, with the exception of the story "Dendromancy," which only runs three pages long and feels out of place. A thoughtful read, where there are few words but none of them feel like they were thrown in as filler. Falcon is a beautifully gifted writer who can make even the saddest of stories have some sort of twinkle of hope for something better.

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