

***Alaska Highway Two-Step***. By Caroline Woodward. Lost Moose, 2017.  
176 pages.

Reviewed by Aline Goncalves

A tale of interwoven journeys of self-discovery. This summarizes what Caroline Woodward does in *Alaska Highway Two-Step*, a novel with several narrative lines that transition between present and past, dream and reality.

The story begins with a first-person account told through the eyes of Mercy Brown, a freelance journalist whose most common jobs involve writing small pieces for insignificant publications. Mercy's destiny is changed when she receives an invitation to write a series of articles about the Alaska Highway, an assignment that requires Mercy and her loyal elderly dog, Sadie, to be en route to Alaska and the Yukon.

Here, one might expect to read about the adventures of a single woman and a dog travelling to a distant land in an old Volkswagen van, but Woodward chooses a mixed path. Instead of a straightforward travel novel, the author alternates journeys between a physical and a psychological landscape. One of these journeys happens in the past and is based on the diaries of Mercy's deceased aunt, Ginger Brown.

Ginger's diaries portray the wanderings of a young classical dancer who travelled across several provinces and the territories as part of a female dance group, between the late 1920s and early 1940s. Ginger is a woman full of energy and new ideas, insecure but courageous, and her personal journey is a parallel to Mercy's own emotional state: Mercy and Ginger are on the move, in search for something that is not always entirely clear to them; they both struggle to find what makes them unique, their own way to express themselves to the world.

The character of Ginger also offers the reader an opportunity for reflection. Open to artistic experimentation and with an independent nature, Ginger scrambles to adapt in a society that values tradition and stability over creativity and freedom. Though the story is a work of fiction, it offers a glimpse about the challenges of being a female artist—particularly a dancer with creative aspirations—in the first half of the

twentieth century. In fact, there are two moments in Ginger's diaries that are significant to demonstrate this situation: the death of Ginger's fellow dancer, an unmarried, young girl who, out of despair and shame, commits suicide after becoming pregnant; and Ginger's own experience in a military camp in Watson Lake during the final phases of the Alaska Highway's construction. Invited to perform in front of a masculine crowd, Ginger quickly becomes an object of harassment and ridicule, as the audience demands a more explicit sort of dance. A woman using her body for original artistic expression rather than pure sensuality was neither expected nor desired in a performance.

Mercy's nightmarish dreams form the other narrative layer of the novel, probably the most eccentric one. Mercy is a reluctant ally of Norman Zsabo, Whitehorse-based detective and head of the Canadian Bureau of Premonitions, a department whose objective is to map possible connections between dreams and disasters in real life. Each one of Mercy's dreams forms a separate chapter and describes catastrophic situations, ranging from drownings and floods to people and animals dying in tragic ways. Mercy reacts to these images with terror and at the same time a sense of obligation: as a top-ten clairvoyant on Norman's list, it is her duty to report to him anything out of the ordinary that her semi-conscious mind produces, even if it appears to be a random collection of terrifying episodes.

In the end, Mercy's dreams do have a connection to the last mystery of the book, a family situation that threatens to become a big tragedy on lands between the Yukon and British Columbia. Even then, the mystery surrounding the last chapters is less important than the emotional journeys of Mercy and Norman and their attempts to reconnect with the past.

Caroline Woodward does a good job in exploring some less known but compelling real-life events and characters as inspiration in her novel. The Canadian Bureau of Premonitions, for example, was inspired by the British Premonitions Bureau, a real entity—now extinct—established after a catastrophe in a Welsh coal mine, an episode that became known as the "Aberfan disaster." In the same manner, references to Nitassinan, a traditional Innu territory located between Quebec and Labrador, are frequent throughout the story. The "Nitassinan work," a fictitious case, is never fully explained by the author in this novel, but refers to the militarization of the region in the 1990s, a true situation that sparked

conflicts between the Indigenous population and the government. Similarly, several actual dancers are mentioned in the narrative, giving it an interesting mix of real artists in a fictionalized context.

In terms of its connection to the North, *Alaska Highway Two-Step* has its role, but not as a historical piece or a book focused on the North as a theme. Though we see constant references to places such as Haines Junction, Whitehorse, Watson Lake, Kluane Park, Haines, and Fairbanks, and snippets of some historical events, these places are more important as background scenery, never taking too much space or assuming the main role in the story. In a similar fashion, the Alaska Highway has clear significance, but not as the central focus. Instead, Woodward uses it as a common ground for the emotional journeys that her characters undertake. When Mercy hits the road, the focus is on the *feeling* of travelling to distant places, the excitement of preparing for a long trip, the sense of fear, freedom, isolation, and the connection to the vast, untouched wilderness. While some readers may feel disappointed with the fact that not much of the history of the Alaska Highway is explored, or that real stories about it don't come into focus, Woodward gives us a good description of the sense of wonder that travellers often feel while travelling in the North.

Originally published in 1993, some parts of the novel may seem a bit outdated: it is hard to imagine packing films for cameras or tape recorders in today's day and time. However, *Alaska Highway Two-Step* is an entertaining read with a quick language, a mystery novel that tends to focus more on personal discoveries rather than the mystery itself. It is recommended for all readers with a general interest in the North.

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