

From Ice to Ashes. By Jessica Simon. NeWest Press, 2009. 260 pages.

Reviewed by Richard Carr

An embittered divorced woman willing to do anything to regain custody of her daughter and please her new lover. A German expatriate now working as an auxiliary constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the Yukon. A troubled and troublesome adolescent Indigenous boy whose most recent brush with the law has resulted in the paralysis of his closest friend. A handsome Moroccan man whose public devotion to Allah, and his gentle nature and exotic aspect—to Yukon residents certainly—masks his hatred for the West and intent to wreak violent havoc. The Yukon Arctic Ultra, a 690 km competition in which participants can run, ski, or bike from Dawson City to Tok, Alaska, a challenging event made more so by a cold front that has dropped temperatures below -40 °C. These are the key ingredients of Jessica Simon's *From Ice to Ashes*, a novel billed as a "fast-paced thriller" that also employs aspects of the adventure tale, crime novel, and coming-of-age story.

Markus Fanger is the constable, a man who has left his native Germany behind permanently and seeks ways to shore up connections to his rugged Canadian world. He furthers this aim by volunteering "to personally supervise Donjek Stoneman's community service" (16) as the duo will take charge of one of the Ultra checkpoints. Donjek, the troubled adolescent evoked above, is part of a local experiment, "circle sentencing," in which a supervising person will provide diversion for teens involved in "constant nuisance crime" who seem headed for an adult life of a similar pattern. Donjek—Donny—is despondent at the state of his friend yet ready to lash out at the man charged with guiding him away from his current pattern: "I know you cooked up this culture camp idea with my dad and Uncle Jake, but don't think I don't see what you're trying to prove, Great White Saviour" (23). Fanger's effort to inform Donny that in an earlier era he would have been headed to adult corrections rather than allowed this last chance, fails to soften the youth as he takes another jab: "I think you're a wannabe Indian" (24).

The novel, however, begins in the midst of another, more interesting, story as Annabeth Secord, a civilian employee at Fort Greely, near Delta Junction, Alaska, moves about her work space cutting wires and then, via phone and laptop, converses with her

lover, Omar Ahmed. The conversation illuminates her wire-cutting and the narrative thread on which the plot will turn. Omar has not come to the Yukon to train for and compete in the Arctic Ultra but to detonate a series of explosions at Fort Greely as a payback, we learn later, for the loss of his eight-year-old son to an American-made bomb in Damascus. Annabeth is drawn to Omar for his singular nature in the Canadian-Alaskan world, but she is aware that she has continually put herself in harm's way only because Omar has pledged to provide support in her custody battle. "I've done for you and now I want my little girl," she declares just as Omar severs their phone connection.

I say "more interesting" because the novel works best in following Omar and his quest for vengeance. Locals find his summer arrival in the Yukon strange but intriguing. His adherence to prayer, his fluency in Arabic and German (he previously lived in Germany), his exotic physical appearance—all of these give him a welcome air of novelty. Omar explains to a curious Donny how religion "guides everything, even our government" (53) and that Western—North American—media are to blame for presenting the Muslim world as an aggressive, evil one: "Do you want to know why the terrorists always lose in the movies? ... It is that they are not doing Allah's bidding" (53). As the Ultra is underway, however, local authorities receive a tip that points to Omar as the one who engineered a theft at the Boreal Blasters' storage magazine, and a timely call from German authorities reveals that Omar is not who he claims to be, that the gentle Moroccan is instead a potentially dangerous man. Omar's journey through the Yukon piles obstacle upon obstacle—at one point his foot is caught in a trap—but convinced that he is doing "Allah's bidding," he proceeds, determined to reach Fort Greely and achieve his revenge.

From Fire to Ice does not succeed as well when it focuses on Constable Fanger and his attempt to draw Donjek out of himself. That is, Fanger may succeed, but neither character is developed in ways likely to sustain reader attention. Beyond the human element, Simon expends much energy in detailing the physical world through which the characters pass—the cold, rough, and forbidding terrain of the Yukon—to the exclusion of the human. I noted several passages in which environmental minutiae dwarfed the narrative to little effect. Whether it is Fanger or Omar racing across the landscape, the character is too often little more than a cipher moving through space.

As Omar crosses into Alaska, however, and reunites with Annabeth, Simon inserts an unexpected element into the narrative—

tensions between Canada and the United States. Readers might expect an easy camaraderie between residents of the frozen north, whether they reside in Whitehorse or Tok, Delta Junction or Dawson. Instead, Fanger's attempt to warn Alaska by telephone of Omar's attack on the GMD (the anti-ballistic missile system) meets an immediate roadblock. "A terrorist strike is at hand," Fanger warns (234) but receives this response: "We don't take orders from civilians, sir There's a chain of command" (234).

These final pages are the most absorbing, and the section in which Simon can lay the strongest claim to writing a "fast-paced thriller." The novel touches on potentially larger issues—the emergence of terrorism in an ordinary place, the challenges for a boy to become a proud Indigenous man in a world that holds low expectations and opportunity, the ways in which national borders create or ensure barriers. Simon, however, is more interested in bringing her plot to a climax. Can local authorities, unused to defeating or even confronting international terrorism, rise to the moment? Will Omar fulfill "Allah's bidding" at Fort Greely? The opportunity to bring a deeper dimension into the narrative is not pursued as the novel lurches toward a rousing end. For readers piqued by a work with an unfamiliar setting and eager to sense the complex world of the Yukon and Interior Alaska, *From Fire to Ashes* is unlikely to satisfy. Yet residents of this isolated, sparsely populated region, at least, may well find the novel a work that does just that—satisfy. In her "Acknowledgements" Jessica Simon reaches out to her many supporters and closes by thanking them "for giving me a story that stems from all of us."

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Editor's note: With sadness, we report that Jessica Simon passed away suddenly in September 2017. Simon's most recent publication Body of Evidence: A Collection of Killer 'Ku was edited with Whitehorse poet kjmunro and published in June 2017. Simon was an enthusiastic and supportive member of the Yukon writing community and her enormous contributions will be missed.