

*Zhòh: The Clan of the Wolf*. By Bob Hayes. Wolves of the Yukon Publishing, 2016. 344 pages.

Reviewed by Zoë Wise

*Zhòh: The Clan of the Wolf* is a 300 page adventure set 14,000 years ago in the Arctic. Written by a Yukon wolf biologist, *Zhòh* is a speculation of what life in the prehistoric northern climate might have been like. Author Bob Hayes's first work of fiction, the novel follows the clan of the wolf, as the title promises, but it perhaps would have been more accurately named the clan of the wolf and bear as two of the three primary characters are members of the bear clan. The novel begins following the clan of the wolf: we learn their way of life, their traditions, their customs, and what it took to survive in this rugged climate. Hayes's writing can be choppy at times, but he is quick to throw the reader into the action and danger of living amongst wild animals in the Arctic.

The novel includes words in Gwich'in—the language still spoken by a small number of Indigenous people in northern Yukon and Alaska. The Gwich'in words are initially followed by the English translation, and there is a glossary of Gwich'in words at the back.

The novel is filled with historical facts that prove Hayes's dedication and the degree of his research, but which result in sometimes exposition-heavy descriptors that keep the action from really getting started until the second part of the book. The novel really picks up when protagonist Naali, a girl with magical powers, is introduced. Naali can “dream-walk”: she can see what is to happen, can dream in metaphor and animal languages, and she can speak to animals (an ability that comes in handy on a tundra landscape filled with predators). Naali, her brother Barik, and wolf clan member Kazaan are dramatically separated from other humans in a fight with a lion, and are forced to survive alone in the Arctic, embarking on a journey filled with hunts, escaped attacks from predators, and teenage hormones. As drama ensues among the three of them, we also follow the experience of Assan, Kazaan's mother, and her fight for survival with two other women and a notoriously evil bushman.

A wholly encompassing look at prehistoric life in the Arctic, the novel shifts between human and non-human-animal perspectives—prosy outlooks that are perhaps not totally essential for the plot. Hayes does not hold back his imagination: he jumps into the heads of ravens,

foxes, and, more importantly, wolves. The narration takes liberties to tell the story from any character's point of view, which can sometimes leave the reader unsure who she should be paying attention to. The most jarring shift in narration, however, is the switch from past tense to present tense, accompanied by a font change, when the narrator jumps into the heads of Grey-Eye, Broken-Tail, and Blue, members of a wolf pack we follow throughout the narrative.

While Hayes does an excellent job of educating his reader about the history, his novel's portrayal of women leaves much to be desired. The women are stereotypically submissive characters, unable to survive without a male to the point where they actually refuse to hunt; and they seem to readily accept their husband's marriage to younger, prettier women. The women dutifully do the chores, the cooking, and the cleaning of the caves in which they dwell, and are so unable to fend for themselves that three of them willingly spend the good part of a year living with a man they know is planning to kill them. Even Naali, who can speak to animals and coerce them into becoming her dinner, is unable to survive on her own. But not only that—for much of the novel Naali is treated like a commodity, exchanged from one man to the next. While most of the women in the novel are not granted the freedom to exist without a man, Hayes does for a short period introduce a young female character who has survived the winter on her own by building snares and hiding in the crevasses of a cave where predators cannot reach her. Once the girl has been rescued by men, however, she is not allowed to exist with such power: when the group plans to leave the location where she was found, she wishes to stay behind and her character is swiftly killed off.

While it's acceptable for authors to fictionalize when writing in the genre of historical fiction, Hayes seeks to make his narrative as historically accurate as possible. In the acknowledgements, he references several people who have fact checked his book, and he states that many of the animal scenes are written from his own experiences as a biologist. Still, Hayes creatively imagines a magical world where the lives of humans and animals intertwine. Altogether, *Zhòh: The Clan of the Wolf* is a tremendously inventive novel that engages the reader in a gripping account of prehistoric life.

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