

This Time, This Place
by
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Let's admit Alaska is its own place with its own foibles and eccentricities. Whether we've been born here or somehow came to rest here, this is our place and we've grown used to it. So those questions we often take from would-be tourists or relatives—is it dark all the time up there? do you accept American money? does everybody live in an igloo?—are mostly funny. And those questions are easily dismissed.

But when we sit down to write our stories set in Alaska, then what? That's a harder problem. How do we account for those middle class folks who live in dry cabins? I remember in my cheechako days reading the classifieds in the News-Miner and wondering, "Dry cabin? Who would want to live in a wet cabin or even a damp cabin?" How is a fiction writer to explain? To explain dry cabins, three-sided log cabins, headbolt heaters and plug-ins, dip nets, breakup boots and tundra tires?

And here is where much Alaska based fiction runs off the rails. Because, I would suggest, it's not fiction's job to explain Alaska or any other place. Fiction's job is to tell good stories. So how to account for the rest, those features that make this odd place what it is?

I'm not sure there is any such need. Readers don't need to know everything in our fictive worlds with certainty. Years ago, I, a high school kid whose ambitious mom had given him a stack of books, books that the magazines she read assured her, every mother's child should read before going to college, sat in my attic room reading, reading Tolstoy's War and Peace. Who were these people who went around in felt boots, drank tea from samovars, spoke French even though they were Russians? And it took me decades before I learned: Here in Fairbanks people went around in Lobbens—people actually could wear felt boots and not get their feet wet. And eventually I got the idea of samovars and the choice to speak French, too. Still, without any Wikipedia to help me out, I soldiered on through that long war and fraught peace.

I'll say again, readers don't need to know every single thing to participate in a work of fiction. We readers are capable of picking things up through connotation, through simple use of terms in precisely the way we have come to use them ourselves. That trip to the outhouse (and the gift of a northern lights display we're sometimes lucky to observe on the way) begins to explain what a "dry cabin" is all about. To borrow from Whitman, "...what I assume, you shall assume." Mostly this strategy works, and by trusting it, writers allow fiction to do what it does best, tell good stories.

Now, time: That's another matter. Our fiction does take place in time. Often it takes place in our time, this time. And when we write in our present, without being too self-conscious about it, we're laying down markers that indicate the details of our

time and what will be understood to be our time by those readers in the future in the same way a hound might get on the scent of a fox. Writing in our present time often ends up taking care of itself.

But what if we're writing about some other time: the past, as in Eowyn Ivey's The Snow Child, or some near apocalyptic future as in Don Rearden's The Raven's Gift? Is that another matter, too? Not necessarily. Before we read a word of The Snow Child we're offered, "Wolverine River, Alaska, 1920". That date serves as an anchor, prepares the reader to enter a past, but still mostly familiar and available world. The Raven's Gift works differently—as with much speculative fiction, readers are dropped into a world while familiar in some respects, is baffling in others. "What went wrong here" becomes a key element of the reader's participation. Details indicate the time as not precisely the here-and-now, but a time close enough to contain many of the details—four wheelers and blue tarps—of the present. This is a speculative world built off the scaffolding of world we know.

When a writer operates in the not-now, temporal markers matter more. Once a writer enters such a world, she or he must establish that time and be true to the details of that time. Failure to do so can result in what we call "howlers." For example, a friend back in graduate school wrote a story that featured a 1943 Plymouth. Of course, no cars were built in the war years. A howler. Commit a few more of these howlers, and a writer loses the confidence of the reader.

The dusty old terms "period piece" and "local color" end up having a slightly derogatory connotation because they suggest fiction where too much obsession over the details of time and place have overwhelmed the story at hand. We Alaskans, in our desire to explain our particular time and place, are always at risk of committing both faults.

Those participating readers we count on are smart, can piece together our odd corner of this round planet from the shards of place and time we offer. Trust them. Let them.