



Back Story Alaska

Lance Brewer

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Back Story Alaska is an entertaining love story about Alaska.

Lance Brewer's engaging memoir *Back Story Alaska* explores the state's bush territory from the perspective of an unlikely tour guide—a “city boy and lawyer” who adopts the wilderness as his own.

Brewer's book recalls how he, an Alaskan transplant, became a bush pilot, establishing Camp Brewer to ferry tourists to remote spots. His stories journey along the Iditarod Trail, through the valley of the the Alaska Range, and in the skies overhead, surveying great panoramic swaths of tundra below.

The text is paired with striking images by photographer Robert Dreeszen that illustrate the natural beauty of the snowy state, especially wildlife like foxes, bears, eagles, wolves, and sled dogs. The stunning photos do not explicitly illustrate what's in the text, but they help evoke the rugged natural environment that's being described throughout the work.

Singsongy poems come alongside the narrative, and are largely written in rhyming couplets. Their language trends literal and straightforward, in service of points already tidily encapsulated in their titles, like “Time is Broken” or “Dear God—Winter Lied to Me.”

Tucked within lengthy segments of prose almost as an afterthought, the poems are largely forgettable, overshadowed by the engaging storytelling in the rest of the book. The compelling tales of the Last Frontier captivate, as when Brewer flies a ski plane over the famed Iditarod race, following the dogsled teams across Alaska to Nome.

The book imparts a good sense of its often-eccentric characters, no matter how brief their appearances, such as an “edgy” tattooed bartender who questions whether a food order is hypocritical, or a quick-witted Australian barkeep who gives as good as she gets among some rough-hewn characters.

Many of the characters are given nicknames like “Berta,” “Jack the Miner,” or “German Friend” to protect their identities. The book is as frank and forthright in its depictions as it is reflective, as when Brewer becomes deeply troubled that a camper casually uses a gay slur. There's a philosophical bent that's evinced in the book's regular quotes, many from Mark Twain.

The prose is matter-of-fact, but with concrete descriptions, clear action, and varying sentence lengths. Many stories read as anecdotal, though they recount Brewer's experience with humor, charm, and a strong command of detail.

Divided into chapters that discretely relate various escapades, the book still hews to overarching and satisfying narrative structures. Brewer faces the stigma of being a newcomer and ultimately confronts a fellow fisherman upset that an interloper is “fishing our spots and catching our fish,” loudly questioning whether his heavy southern accent means he hails from southern Alaska. Individual tales flow together well, with a cohesiveness and defined sensibility.

Back Story Alaska is an entertaining love story about Alaska, and a heartfelt ode to the state's bounteous natural beauty and unbridled spirit.

JOSEPH S. PETE (September 10, 2018)

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