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Bear Down, Bear North: Alaska Stories

Melinda Moustakis
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Winner of the 2010 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, *Bear Down, Bear North* gathers thirteen stories about the vulnerabilities of the heart as well as on family loyalty enduring in spite of discord. The Alaskans portrayed, several of whom recur in more than one story, are expectedly tough when faced with fishing accidents, domestic abuse, animal deaths, and the wreckage of a plane, among other hardships. Yet Moustakis transcends easy archetypes. Her characters are more than stoic examples of pioneering backbone; they emerge as figures whose near-tensile strengths are tempered by the struggle to connect with those they love.

Featured in journals such as the *Kenyon Review* and nominated for five Pushcart prizes, Moustakis captures her native environs with an acute sense for everyday conflict. In "The Weight of You," Gracie is unable to confront her brother Jack's alcoholism; in "Miners and Trappers," she considers the problem of serving as an intermediary between Jack and his concerned wife while acknowledging that memories of a shared childhood complicate her role. The question of what it means to protect someone in return for their past help—and what happens when such protection becomes harmful—echoes with unanswerable consequences. "This One Isn't Going to Be Afraid" further deepens the tug between filial love and duty, as a daughter surveys her mother's traits and discovers that she will never be as capable; "What You Can Endure" revisits the pair, adding new insights to their relationship with a running reference to whales.

In one of the most effective series of linked stories ("Us Kids," "Point Mackenzie," and "Bite"), brothers and sisters navigate life on the homestead with a camaraderie that is shadowed by cruelty. Moustakis allows readers to fully witness how experience—from poverty that necessitates scavenging through the belongings of the dead to a younger sister's beating—can shape lives without creating eternal victims. Burdens become gritty, matter-of-fact reminders that profound emotions often lie behind even the most unflinching exteriors. A welcome tribute to working class lives, *Bear Down, Bear North* is a debut of impressive voices in the wilderness.
KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2011)

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