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Blue Wolf

Lise McClendon
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When Alix Thorssen was a little girl she encountered a wolf while working on her aunt's sheep ranch. Years later, as an art gallery owner in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Alix receives, from the eccentric but talented painter Queen Johns, a painting of a blue wolf to be auctioned off in support of the Teton Land Trust. Wolves-the one from Alix's childhood and the painted blue one-bracket a mystery novel filled with wolves. It is illegal to shoot the animals in the Tetons, but a questionable wolf shooting on ranch land has stirred the tension between the Park Service, ranchers, and animal rights activists. It has also stirred Queen Johns into action. She asks Alix to look into the unsolved shooting of Derek Wylie twenty-five years earlier. Quickly Alix discovers that Queen was the boy's mother, and that she now believes that her dead son has returned as one of the wolves that the Park Service wants to trap and remove from the area.

As Alix digs into the long-cold murder case, the heated battle between ranchers and activists entwines with those involved with Derek's death, from a wealthy rancher to a high school science teacher to a professional cowboy. Hostilities mount, and as the motives become entangled, it becomes difficult to tell the good guys from the bad guys.

For a novel that takes place in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the sense of place seems thin. The author's characterizations are often so skimpy that some characters are easily confused with one another. What McClendon does very well is create an interesting, complex character in the form of Alix Thorssen. At once sad and hopeful for the future, she constantly pushes people away as she simultaneously draws them in. Her thoughts about art are occasionally insightful; her plotting is Byzantine enough to keep the reader guessing. What elevates the novel overall is the pounding, primeval force of wolves that runs throughout the book: predatory, threatening, mystical, political, mythological. The novel gains in resonance and strength as these wolf images pulse beneath the surface of the writing.

MARK TERRY (September / October 2001)

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