ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

HISTORICAL

Jaga Na Kala
John Bacon
AuthorHouse
978-1-4520-8658-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

In common parlance, when "the wolf is at the door," one can expect death and destruction. But when a wolf comes to the cabin of an orphaned sixteen-year-old in the Canadian wilderness, the predator gives Ruth, our heroic protagonist, a reason to live. The year is 1632, and Ruth's friendship with a wolf she names Zak enables her to survive that rough winter and beyond. Zak brings around more wolves who become Ruth's family and hunting pack. She also befriends the nearby Indians, eventually becoming their chief. The Indians soon refer to her as *Jaga Na Kala* meaning "mother of wolves." John Bacon's historical fiction novel, *Jaga Na Kala*, chronicles Ruth's maturation from girl to woman as she interacts with the Indians, her wolves, and the occasional white person.

Ruth respects the local natives, learning their language and adopting their ways. Indeed, many conversations between Ruth and the Indians are written in the Indian language, instead of English translations, giving the novel added authenticity. Although the protagonist spent her childhood in England, the Indian concept of the Great Spirit makes more sense to her than the Christian concept of God. This leads to some thought-provoking discussions about deities across cultures. Refreshingly, Ruth encourages her fellow whites to recognize the merits of the indigenous culture. The main character's loving rapport with her pack provides a satisfying ironic twist on *Little Red Riding Hood.*

Unfortunately, the novel's good points are marred first by the decision not to offer a parenthetical English translation of the title on the front cover. The phrase *jaga na kala* isn't translated until well into the book. On the subject of foreign languages, Bacon's choice to put an English-to-Indian glossary at the end of the novel confuses the audience further by presenting conversations in an alien tongue with infrequent translations and rare reminders of the meanings of previously-defined Indian words. Putting the dictionary at the beginning of the novel would underscore the importance of the language in the book and offer readers a conveniently located vocabulary list to refer to.

With the exception of Ruth, all human characters remain flat and one-dimensional. Even the wolves all blend together. The protagonist's initial bond with Zak develops too quickly, defying any logic. Even if Zak initially does enter Ruth's cabin to get warm, Bacon does not adequately explain how the fierce creature soon becomes docile.

Grammatical errors abound: comma splices, run-on sentences, and missing punctuation impede understanding. Sloppy editing mistakes also intrude: the spelling of a key wolf's name changes throughout the book. That said, those who can get past the errors are rewarded with an original gem of an idea, based at a time when white women are often depicted as powerless and ignorant. Ruth, a self-reliant mother of wolves, earns the esteem of natives, settlers, and predators alike in the New World she calls home. The adventures of this extraordinary protagonist will interest audiences fascinated by indigenous cultures and human-animal interaction.

Jill Allen