

Take Good Care of the Garden and the Dogs: Family, Friends, and Faith in Small-Town Alaska

Heather Lende

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"It's a shallow life that doesn't give a person a few scars," writer Garrison Keillor said about the imaginary town Lake Wobegon, a place seemingly protected from politics, progress, and the unpleasantness of the rest of the world. He could as easily have been talking about Haines, Alaska, where Heather Lende's fine new memoir is set.

Haines is a small, isolated place. Its mixed population of Native Americans and whites lives on the icy shores of the Pacific, far enough north to see the Northern Lights. The community is tight-knit: when tragedy strikes, the word is spread by phone and over back fences; the whole town knows the news in less than three hours. Lende is the hub for all this chatter—both the gossip and the serious stuff—because she writes obituaries for the town paper. She knows everyone's story, and she has a compassionate, even-keeled way of telling it. There is no judgment, but plenty of humor.

Lende's special awareness of her place in her community is compelling. The main thrust of the story is personal, set in the space of a few years and addressing the death of Lende's mother, a near-fatal accident, and recovery from both. But Lende's history and the town's are inextricably scrolled together. Each event is placed in the context of the larger sphere, which gives this memoir a sense of timelessness. Lende writes, "I don't know all the words to all the songs that bubble up and out of me as I walk—the ones I hear and then give voice to—so I'll hum and make up a line or two." She has the same ease with sharing the many stories in her life, effortlessly weaving them together into a single thread that is musical, whimsical, thoughtful, and above all trembling with life.

Lende is honest about her own shortcomings and emotions (sometimes she doesn't want to do what's right). In fact, she has a tendency to treat all things as though they are equal—the memory of her mother's death is told in the same tone as the story of raising a new totem pole in the Native village. Her equanimity, at times, can dampen the story's vibrancy. However, the town and its people are interesting enough to keep the plot moving.

Folksy, thought-provoking, and honest, Lende's memoir is a fine picture of small-town life in a place few people have been. Its themes of forgiveness, support, community, and faith speak to all readers, while its refreshing characters give a sense of adventure, even in everyday life.

CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (May / June 2010)

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