

The City Beneath the Snow

Marjorie Kowalski Cole

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"Maybe it's stupid to live in a place like Fairbanks where fall is only a week long, but it sure is a beautiful week." This line from the third story in *The City Beneath the Snow* could just as well have been used to preface the entire collection. These are indeed short stories, but each has its own unquestionable beauty.

Cole wastes no words, and those she uses are well chosen. From vibrant descriptors such as "tootling" horns to simple, profound statements addressing life-changing events—"You push forward."—we are invited to enter the lives of Cole's characters through her extraordinary ability to get inside their heads. This is an exposé of the thoughts, fears, and dreams of a handful of ordinary people in Alaska. Story by story, Cole brings readers quickly into their experiences and allows them just enough time to feel a rapport bordering on the intimate. New-found freedom is startling and wonderful: "A new sensation had fallen over her, like a new coat. Her skin seemed to inhale the space around her." Drab existence falls away as people are seen through fresh eyes: "Her smile was shy, half-secretive, as if she were...hiding trinkets in a birthday cake."

A genuine appreciation for life shines through Cole's writing—an appreciation for both the challenging circumstances themselves and the resiliency of everyday people to deal with them in ways that go well past mere resolve into unexpected action: a young woman on a lonely adventure has a heart-pounding confrontation with a moose; a man shares his struggle to stay in a marriage that has been shattered by the loss of a child. Out of stilted, almost dead emotions come sparks of tenderness, vision, or even bravado.

Cole's descriptions speak to the mind and soul alike: "Annie carried memories like spurs she'd use against herself." And always there are strong, multiple messages in each story. They may be about rising above one's fear or about the profound affect one person's life can have on another from the inside out. Or simply about the hope of renewal: in "Hawks Over Water," Mary Leader's daughter unveils the manuscript that was to become *A Spell on the Water*, Cole's novel of 2011.

Cole allows us to partake in the beauty and the harshness of the Alaskan landscape, but they are background to the characters' thoughts about what has happened, or what is happening, in their lives. Each story in *The City Beneath the Snow* begs re-reading, whether to absorb the poetic prose once more, or to attempt to resolve an ending that left a question mark. The characters are real, their situations elicit compassion, and Cole's writing deserves to be savored.

PATRICIA MORROW (January 26, 2012)

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