

The Dead Go to Seattle

Vivian Faith Prescott

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Cleverly framed, these stories capture a rich island community that is steeped in oral traditions.

In Alaska's southeastern archipelago, the small Wrangell Island is home to a mix of peoples and stories. Local author Vivian Faith Prescott draws inspiration from a variety of sources for her compelling collection *The Dead Go to Seattle*.

The book is a novel about an island community, told through more than forty stories. The pieces skip around in time, characters reemerge or fade away, myth intersects with life, and the effects of worldwide climate change threaten everyone on the island.

To tie together these stories—many previously published in literary journals—Prescott uses the clever framing device of John Swanton, a Smithsonian Institution ethnologist visiting Wrangell to collect locals' stories, along with his Tlingit aide, Tooch Waterson. Each story is noted with the date on which the recording is being made, letting Prescott smoothly jump backward and forward in time, and serving as a reminder that these characters are all telling their stories to an audience.

Those stories include elements from oral traditions, like the shape-shifting otter people of Tlingit lore, who prey on children, or others who turn into killer whales but seem to retain some of their human tendencies. Others focus on the challenges faced by realistic characters, like Tova, a pink-haired young woman who returns home only to be disowned by her father because she has come out as a lesbian.

Tova is probably the book's most developed character, whether she's cautiously sharing folktales with the researchers, bonding with her mother, or navigating the island's reaction to her Sami heritage.

Tova's father appears in other stories, including some before her birth. Other characters who play major roles in one story set decades ago have their fates revealed in more recently set pieces. Even Swanton and Waterson become active characters in certain stories, as when Tova and some of her friends prank the ethnologist with a tongue-in-cheek initiation ceremony, or when Swanton has to find his way to safety and attempt to rescue his research when severe flooding hits the island.

This structure works very well, and it makes *The Dead Go to Seattle* a collection that rewards rereading and rumination.

JEFF FLEISCHER (September/October 2017)

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