



★ **The Snow Collectors**

Tina May Hall

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In Tina May Hall's intoxicating *The Snow Collectors*, a mournful mystery unfolds in an icy town, at the juncture where the past meets modernity.

Not long ago, Henna lost her parents and twin sister to the storm-swept sea. In her grief, she moved as far north as civilization would allow, to an Arctic village where she could hole up and write encyclopedia entries for pay. Save for her dog, Henna wished to avoid all living beings, to leave her heart "down deep ... where only blind and armored things survived." And she was successful enough at avoidance before a woman's body turned up in her bushes, an antique letter fragment clutched in her hands.

That scrap thrusts Henna into an archival conversation with Lady Jane and Captain John Franklin, famous because of his ill-fated nineteenth-century expedition; her disquisitions lead her into danger. The rich, handsome police chief's connected pushiness sounds alarm bells that Henna seems to miss, though her oblivious posture may owe more to fatalism than yearning.

Though set in a near future when now-endangered bees, birds, and glaciers are gone, the text has heirloom sensibilities. Henna narrates, her purling phrases functioning like dirge, memorializing words as they fade into silence and passion as it buzzes to its peaks. Her fascination with nineteenth-century snow collectors complements her own preoccupation with resisting impermanence and restraints.

The evocative secondary cast includes a mute neighbor who communicates in poetic fragments; the villagers, "a wooly bunch" loping through the story's background; a knowledgeable librarian, the only character whose dialogue is grounded; three old men who act as a Greek chorus, commenting on the townspeople's comings and goings; and a steampunk-garbed outsider whose fascination is esoterica. They each contribute to the book's dreamy Gothic atmosphere, which is redolent of candlelight and incense, marked by damask decorations and houses ablaze against the snow.

Its brutality tempered by its lovely phraseology, *The Snow Collectors* is an unusual mystery whose quirks are worth giving in to.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2020)

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