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From the bookshelf: Powerful novel portrays cultures' collision

By SHANA LOSHBAUGH



Flight of the Goose: A Story of the Far North

By Lesley Thomas

Published by Far Eastern Press

430 pages

\$19.95 (softcover)

The theme of star-crossed lovers is as old and universal as any in the world's storytelling traditions. Lesley Thomas conjures up a startling new variation in her impressive debut novel, "Flight of the Goose."

Kayuqtuq, "the red fox," also called Gretchen, narrates the tale of the man who both destroyed and saved her life. His name was Leif Trygvesen; he was a field biologist, and he came north to search for an elusive endangered goose. Instead, he found Kayuqtuq.

"Flight of the Goose: A story of the Far North," by Lesley Thomas

He writes in his diary: "Ran into a strange girl asleep in the heather. I don't know what goes for normal here but she seems churlish and unhappy and like some kind of malnourished and disheveled stray. Who am I to talk ... ?"

The story is set in the early 1970s, on the shores near the Bering Strait and in the fictional Inupiat village of Itiak. It is a time of sorrow, war, harsh racism and painful change in the Bush.

Kayuqtuq is an outcast among the villagers. An orphan, neglected and molested, she was taken in years before by the respected Ugungoraseok family. She has two more strikes against her: she is not Inupiaq but a despised "itkiliq" (Indian), and she studies the ancient but now taboo path of shamanism.

In a mean mood, she resolves to take on the white "birdman" as a project, intending to challenge his scientific worldview with her supernatural powers.

But Trygvesen confounds her expectations and those of the villagers. He, too, is an outcast of sorts. A hippy, a conscientious objector, the gentle son of a cruel father, he is not like other

white men who have come to the village. Although they initially deride him as a fool for counting bird droppings, his quiet respectfulness gradually wins people over.

For the first time, the wary Kayuqtuq finds herself ensnared by a greater power than her own. She and Trygvesen are drawn to each other despite themselves. Alternately mesmerizing, astonishing and terrifying each other, they are pulled into a tumultuous liaison.

"Someone was skillfully pulling sinews from inside me and joining them with his, lacing and forming a mysterious cat's cradle that moved and altered each second," Kayuqtuq tells us. "I was hooked like a minnow by his eyes; I was swimming in him, though I didn't know how to swim."

Their fears and desires unleash social and spiritual forces beyond their understanding and control, forces that engulf everyone close to them.

A tale of passion and otherworldly spirits could lead a lesser writer astray, succumbing to the preposterous or overwrought. But Thomas focuses her story with skill, using understatement and humble details to keep it on track. With exquisite pacing, she brings the reader into the storm of her characters' lives.

The author weaves a strong and complex story. She adroitly includes history, sociology, anthropology, biology and religion, all rendered personal. She addresses relations among the races, between the genders, between science and mysticism, among others. Without contrivance or name-dropping, she includes poetry quotations, allusions to other literature and references to Norse and Native American mythologies. She peels away layers of preconception and uncovers facets both dark and bright.

Beneath the tale lies a strong description of the living landscape and through it runs an electric current of eroticism.

The book's only significant weakness is the foreshadowing, which detracts from the element of surprise. Also, some readers may find Trygvesen's compliant nature effeminate.

On one level, "Flight of the Goose" is reminiscent of "Wuthering Heights," with the Alaska tundra replacing the British moors.

On another, it begs comparison with last year's notable Bush novel, Seth Kantner's "Ordinary Wolves." The inner and outer worlds of both books overlap, but they are quite different in plot and tone, most notably due to the female perspective in "Flight of the Goose." Taken together, the two novels suggest a great creative inspiration from Northwest Alaska.

It takes a gutsy white writer to try to write sincerely from a Native viewpoint. Thomas conveys authenticity and sympathy.

She grew up in an Inupiat village, has Native relatives and participated in many traditional activities described in the book, according to information from the publisher. Her choice to tell the tale in the paired voices of Kayuqtuq and Trygvesen, each slightly outside their respective cultures, each revealing misunderstandings and deeper understandings, was a wise one.

Thomas has given us a haunting book, rich with nuance and ambiguity. Beyond the strong characters, exotic plot and masterful prose, it challenges our worldview and touches the heart.

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