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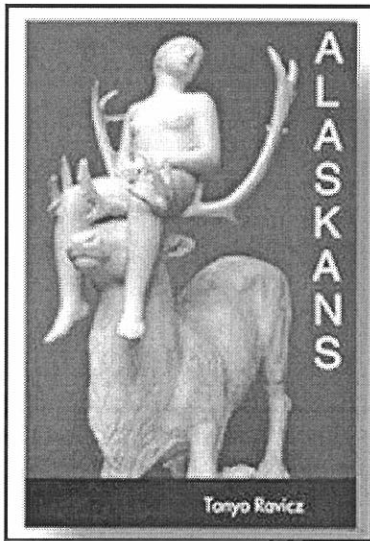
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Former Alaskan author shares stories of life in Alaska with accuracy

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Tanyo Ravicz

FAIRBANKS — In “A Fox in May,” the story that opens Tanyo Ravicz’s new short story collection “Alaskans,” a thirteen-year-old boy named Jed Hanson learns that a fox has been stealing his chickens. It’s hardly a new idea for a story, but through Ravicz’s deft and subtle writing skills, it becomes the springboard for a memorable coming-of-age story peopled by a small, well-defined ensemble of characters that live in the hills just outside of Fairbanks.

As the story gently reveals itself, we learn that Jed’s father passed away a couple of years earlier and that his family has since been struggling to get by, slowly rebuilding a sense of normalcy. Jed’s mother now works in a downtown law office, and through a relationship thus far undisclosed to her children, has become pregnant. Her father now lives with the family, where he plays substitute dad to Jed and his sister while fighting his own battle against cancer. Jed’s sister, Willoughby, is a somewhat difficult teen who bickers with her brother but is ultimately loyal to him.

What Ravicz has created here is an utterly believable family. Over the course of the roughly seventy pages during which readers get to know them, the four come to seem like greatly appreciated neighbors, each one burdened with the sorts of personality quirks that haunt us all, but ultimately the type of decent people we’d like to know.

Meanwhile, readers who live in Fairbanks will quickly recognize their town as it drifts in and out of the storytelling. Ravicz weaves the details of daily life in the Golden Heart City into his tale only to the extent that they are needed, avoiding the trap of overly dramatizing life in the

north yet never painting a despairing picture of our town either. Hence we get quick visits to Fred Meyer as well as Birch Hill Cemetery, Jed and his classmates holding a carwash in the parking lot at Sam's Club, and a slushy snow falling on the thawing ground of May. It's precisely the daily life most of us experience as routine and Ravicz neither celebrates it nor critiques it. He just observes it and lets it happen.

As for the story itself, not that much occurs. Jed realizes that to save his chickens he has to trap the fox, even though it's out of season. His mother and sister work through the kinks of their lives, and his grandfather's health slowly declines. Not the stuff of high drama, just a few days in the life. But the author works well with these happenings.

Ravicz doesn't trivialize his characters emotions. Neither does he delve into melancholia (an all-too-common tendency with current fiction writers.) He isn't out to make us feel good either. He has simply constructed a remarkably well-balanced story. As a reader who finds most current short fiction hard to take, I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed this piece.

None of the nine remaining stories that make up this book are quite as good as the opener, but all are worthy of reading. Ravicz has arranged this collection to mirror the passage of life. The first story follows the experiences of youth, the next involves a newly arrived Alaskan, later stories concern middle age, and by the final two tales he's focusing on old age and death.

The stories are set in several Alaskan locations. "Fish and Wine" takes place along the coast of Bristol Bay and follows several cannery workers on a beer run into Naknek (and if you've ever spent time among Alaska's seasonal workers, you'll recognize the characters in this one.) "One Last Black Bear" involves firefighters working an Interior wildfire. We meet "Naomi" on Kodiak Island, while "Caribou, Paxson Lake" explores a hunting trip to the hills west of that well known waypoint along the Richardson Highway. "Brief Stop on the Flyway" is set near Delta Junction, and "Old Blue at Sundown" takes place on the beach near Homer.

Ravicz, who spent some fifteen years in Alaska and still owns property here, captures this state in a way few writers seem capable. He's not given to the grand gesture or the awed statement of Alaska's beauty and grandeur. Alaska is simply, as it is for so many of us, the unique backdrop to our otherwise fairly ordinary lives. And sometimes it's an ugly place (he isn't doing the Naknek Tourism Board any good here.)

More importantly, he's captured the sort of people who live here. We aren't larger-than-life

outdoorsmen and woods-women. Most of us are plugged into the world beyond Alaska's borders, and most of us live here not only out of love for the place, but also with a vague sense of realization that we are resigned to it. Alaska is part of what makes us who we are, for good and for bad and for everything in between. Ravicz may no longer live among us, but he's observed us closely, and he's done us justice in this book.

What I found most surprising about this work is that it's self-published. Generally the books we get at the News-Miner that come from vanity presses are pretty shoddy affairs that are poorly written and even less acceptably edited. This, by contrast, is quite a professional work and it's clear that the author put considerable time and thought into each of these stories. Hopefully he'll be able to sell this one to a larger publishing house with a decent promotions budget, because Tanyo Ravicz has shown with "Alaskans" that he's a writer well deserving of a wide audience.

David A. James lives in Fairbanks.