

KIRKUS REVIEWS

OUR VERDICT

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FAST PARADISE

BY ERIC MAYER

A fascinating novel that provocatively animates the tendrils that connect past and present.

Young archaeologists hunt for evidence of an ancient people on an Arctic island and attempt to reconstruct the life of a teenage girl.

In 1963, the charismatic Professor De Long, a “campus icon” at Pelham College, leads an archeological expedition to Ellesmere Island deep in the high Arctic, “80 degrees north latitude and then some.” De Long hypothesizes that the Tunit people, who inhabited the land one thousand years ago, were influenced by their Norse visitors and, in turn, influenced them. As a result, the Tunit “might have contributed to something like the glory that was Greece and grandeur that was Rome.” The professor’s star pupil, Arthur, accompanied by his girlfriend, Gabby, discover an animal skin with markings that might have belonged to a Tunit girl named Qaya—her name inscribed on the skin—who was possibly embarking on a hunting trek, an important ritualistic passage into adulthood. However, it’s not clear that a female would have been allowed on such a trek, and De Long sternly warns the crew against interpreting the past through the romantic lens of the present, an imposition of one’s values rather than the discovery of another’s. Nevertheless, Gabby becomes obsessed with following the scant evidence to find Qaya’s body, a search more personal than scientific, a peculiar quest movingly portrayed by Mayer. The author also portrays a parallel tale—Qaya’s own longing to set out on a hunt of her own, as well as her hesitation to enter into a marriage with Inuk, to whom she has been promised as a bride since childhood.

Despite the extraordinary distance between the lives of Qaya and Gabby—lives one might consider heterogeneous—Mayer (counter to De Long’s teachings) deftly pushes the reader to consider subtle

affinities and overlapping longings. The author’s command of the geography of the Arctic, and the Indigenous peoples who inhabited it, is masterly. One can hardly believe, as he notes, that he has never set foot there, this terrifyingly forbidding land overlaid by a “permafrost you can’t get through without a nuclear bomb.” Qaya’s story unfolds with a stirring plausibility—her life remote and relatable in equal parts. In this way, with remarkable subtlety, one can see the singularity and universality of her life. De Long memorably counsels against interpreting the ancient past through the familiar lens of the present: “If you went back in a time machine to save them no one would come aboard. They couldn’t imagine ‘save’ from what....They don’t want to be found, Gabby. That would only mean trouble. They wouldn’t even talk to you.” However, his intractable view excludes even a sliver of common human ground, any possible sense of human solidarity, a prohibitive possibility Gabby rejects. The story does tend to digress; the plot meanders and sometimes moves without any sense of narrative urgency. At some parts, too, Gabby’s passion threatens to turn not only frivolously quixotic, but sentimental. Fortunately, she stays on track, and overall, this is a mesmerizing novel, dramatically engaging as it is philosophically thoughtful.

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