



Q&A with Miranda Weiss, author of TIDE, FEATHER, SNOW

Why did you write this book?

I wrote this book because I wanted to understand how a place could make me feel so adrift and confused and romanced all at the same time. The first chapter was born in Alaska, but I wrote most of the book when I was living in New York for graduate school. Even in New York, I couldn't get away from Alaska and my experience adjusting to it.

What do you think is the most striking difference between your life in Alaska and life elsewhere in the U.S.?

Life here is governed by changes in the natural world. On one side of the year, it's blaring sun for almost the entire day, so even the middle of the night is starless dusk. On the other, we are plunged into darkness for months. Over the course of twelve months, six feet of green growth die back to nothing and are replaced by head-high snow. It's not just what's going on outside, it's what's happening to you—to your mood, to what work you do, to how long you sleep, what and when you eat, how many glasses of wine you drink. The lack of light in winter is claustrophobic, but when the days are getting longer by six minutes each in the spring, a restless mania takes over. The changes in the landscape force you to make changes of your own.

Have you ever had any strange wildlife encounters?

Black bears range through our neighborhood every spring and brown bears (grizzlies) are spotted around town too. But my scariest bear experience was with a bear I never actually saw or came at all close to. I was working at a field camp on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in far western Alaska, a vast expanse of tundra where nothing grows higher than your knee. We spent our days alone on the tundra looking for bird nests. Generally, there aren't bears in this region. But one evening, we heard on the VHF radio that a polar bear had been spotted by a pilot about 20 miles from our camp. The bear was far out of its normal range and must have been hungry. I was terrified. Polar bears can easily travel 20 miles in a day, and we were living in tents and had no firearms. For two days, I had terrible polar bear nightmares and thought that every piece of driftwood on the horizon was the bear. A couple of days later, we heard that the pilot had located the animal again and that it had moved out of the region. I finally got a good night's sleep.

So you're married—to John, the boyfriend in the book?

No. John and I parted ways. I recently married a man who has spent the past dozen years of his life working to protect water quality and fish habitats in the region where we live, at an organization called Cook Inletkeeper. Like me, he grew up on the East Coast, and one thing that drew us together was a sort of push/pull with Alaska. At the end of last summer to celebrate our

wedding, we had a big party on the lawn of our friends' house, which someone said was the best potluck they had ever been to in Homer. That's about the highest compliment you can get here.

Is Alaska everything that you thought it would be when you first arrived?

When I look back, I'm shocked at how little I knew about Alaska before I moved here. I didn't have a specific conception of what it would be. I guess that's what allows a place to tug at us so strongly—it has to be part myth, part dream to us. If we knew everything about it already, it wouldn't hold such an allure.

There is, of course, a long tradition of nature writing. What writers have influenced you?

Thoreau, Emerson, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Ed Abbey, Wendell Berry—I was introduced to much of the canon of nature writing in high school, which turned me into a militant vegetarian and got me obsessed with camping. For a state with such a short history, Alaska has a rich literary tradition of its own—from the writings of explorers, naturalists, pioneers, transplants, and Alaska Natives. But most of the books I pulled off my shelves again and again while writing **TIDE, FEATHER, SNOW** weren't about Alaska. Gretel Ehrlich's *Solace of Open Spaces* so beautifully examines a place—Wyoming—its people, and the writer herself. James Galvin's *The Meadow* left me breathless. Anthony Doerr's *The Shell Collector* had a kind of magic powder in it that I hoped would rub off on me. Two other indispensable books: *Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer* and *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*.

At the end of the book, you write that Alaska is at risk. What do you mean?

We live climate change every day in Alaska. It has impacts we can see and feel—looking out our living room windows, we can see glaciers receding up valleys. Coastal villages in the north are toppling into the sea. The permafrost is melting. Alaska has been described as the frontline of global warming. It is part of daily life here. And huge corporations are salivating over natural resources all around us. Not far from where I live, the proposed Chuitna Coal Mine, which would be the third-largest strip coal mine in the country, would wipe out salmon streams, bear and moose habitat, and some really stunning country. And the proposed Pebble Mine would be a massive open pit gold and copper mine in the headwaters of the largest salmon fishery in the world. There are threats to the very things that people love about Alaska—fish, wilderness, silence. But these threats also give us opportunities to forge new paths.

How do you feel when you go back to the East Coast? Do you think you might return there one day?

I feel equally comfortable in chest waders fishing for salmon in a river all day as in the middle of a dance floor at a salsa club in New York. It's at once invigorating and confusing. There are so many things I love about the East Coast—being close to family and old friends, big libraries and museums, cheap dumplings in Chinatown, and great vintage clothing stores. But this is an amazing moment to be living in Alaska—salmon still throng into our streams, there still is what feels like endless undeveloped land, we can still harvest wild food from out our front doors. This is a kind of wealth I don't know if I could ever give up.