The Stars, The Snow, The Fire by John Haines (review)

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the people of the great Northwest, telling the tales of an America that is rapidly vanishing. These are stories of actual experiences that should be read for the pure pleasure they transmit, each in its own earthy, honest way.

The creative writer can find much background material in a book of this kind. Each chapter tells of an unique character, with numerous details to show the background and the environment that shaped that particular character. And for the non-writer, the stories are a good read for a rainy evening by the fire, or, for that matter, during that long wait in one of today's numerous traffic jams.

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The Stars, The Snow, The Fire. By John Haines (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1989. 182 pages, $17.95.)

This dreamy memoir recollects 25 years of homesteading in the Alaskan wilderness. It also imagines and attempts to recover a primordial way of life, an "intenser being." This lost origin haunts Haines's years in Alaska, and makes wilderness life a waking dream of a primal time. Solitude is Haines's trail to this dreamtime, and it is his solitude that both limits and enables the vision of this book.

The other people in this memoir are often nameless, and they appear in stories which are themselves only half-known and which advance in conjectures. These others also rarely speak. Although a very few men with names appear repeatedly, and speak relatively often, they are essentially types of the past: old trappers, storytellers, survivors. Haines calls them "useful ghosts." The solitude of this wilderness is also, as Haines says, "a solitude without women." Haines's "young wife" arrives on page 13; on page 14, "wilderness and marriage . . . come to their parting." A second wife appears a few pages later. She does not speak in the book.

The real presences are the seasons, the water, and especially the animals. If the people are bloodless ghosts, the animals run with blood. Haines makes a living by trapping, and we witness or hear of the killing of ermine, lynx, marten, moose, beaver, coyote, rabbit, bear. We learn, unforgettably, how it feels to break the neck of a fox found alive in a trap, and how wire does its fatal work.

Haines's world is a book of wingprints, stripped bark, snowmark, tracks, of voices in the shadowy dusk. It is this silent world of lost languages that Haines retrieves from the Alaskan wilderness. Storytelling itself is understood as a renewal of "a world abundant with things that walked and flew and swam and seemed possessed of understanding . . . "

The absence of all but ghosts and animals from this solitude constricts the

wilderness the book explores. Unlike Richard Nelson's *The Island Within,* which comprehends the killing of animals in ways borrowed from indigenous peoples, and unlike Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams,* which angles on the far north by way of history, geography, field biology, ecology and, again, native peoples, John Haines goes it alone. This can lead, at times, to an ethos of enormous proportions: "I made for myself a personal domain of which I was the sole ruler."

However, it is also this lonely solitude that releases voices from shadows and offers a rare perspective on our "lighted settlements," where "shadows disperse to the outskirts . . . and the heavy smoke-dimmed dusk is silent."

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Women in the Field: America's Pioneering Women Naturalists. By Marcia Myers Bonta. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991. 299 pages, $29.50/$13.95.)

Women have long participated in natural history studies, but, according to author Marcia Myers Bonta, their secondary status in eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society, combined with the erroneous tendency to label them as "amateurs," often caused their work to be overlooked. Some authors have sought to rectify this prejudice by detailing the lives of individual women naturalists; two recent examples include Maxine Benson's biography of Martha Maxwell and Harriet Kofalk's of Florence Merriam Bailey. But not until Bonta marshalled numerous far-flung sources to write the 25 biographical sketches included in *Women in the Field: America's Pioneering Women Naturalists* have we had the opportunity to sample and compare, in one volume, the numerous ways American women have contributed to the development of the natural sciences.

Bonta approaches her survey of women naturalists by categorizing them as either eighteenth-century pioneers who "slipped" into the study of natural history through accepted activities, such as gardening, painting and writing, field naturalists who delighted in all aspects of the natural world, or those who, as natural history began to fragment into separate disciplines, became botanists, entomologists, ornithologists and ecologists. Having established this framework, Bonta proceeds to fill it with lively and informative portraits that focus on the women as individuals, field persons, professionals and friends.

A number of patterns emerge from Bonta's survey. Most of the women profiled were childless, had a male mentor early in their career and, although a few, such as botanist Alice Eastwood and entomologist Edith Patch, held professional positions, most of the women were field people, Annie Alexander for example, who tended to be modest about their accomplishments. These accomplishments, anything but modest, ranged from helping establish major muse-