

**L.W. van Keuren, *Raven, Stay by Me*. St. John's: Jesperson, 2009.  
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L.W. van Keuren, *Raven, Stay by Me*. St. John's: Jespersion, 2009. ISBN: 1-894377-30-3.

*RAVEN, STAYBYME* is the story of 11-year old Inga, a Norse girl, who finds herself the sole survivor of a shipwreck off the coast of Newfoundland. Inga, along with her grandmother, boarded the Vinland-bound ship in order to search for Inga's Uncle Knut, who had left for Vinland some years earlier. Stranded in unfamiliar territory, Inga searches for any sign of other survivors. She is unable to find any people, but during her search she finds a small injured raven. As she continues to search for her people, Inga nurses the raven back to health, and the two become dependent on each other for survival. Finding nothing left of the ship but driftwood, a mast, and a woman's pouch, Inga is forced to consider her options. Does she try to make it on her own, or is she brave enough to enter a "skraeling" camp, despite everything she has learned about the allegedly brutish Native people who inhabit this place?

Overall, *Raven, Stand by Me* is interesting and, for the most part, enjoyable. Inga is a strong protagonist who struggles to deal with the loss of her grandmother, as well as the uncertainty of her own survival in an unknown place. As Inga tries to cope with her situation, her distress is intensified by a fear of island ghosts and spirits, which nicely incorporates Norse beliefs and superstitions into her struggle with grief and loneliness. Yet, despite her feelings, Inga is able to overcome her fears in order to fight for her survival. She makes quick, decisive actions to grab eggs from a nest and to weave a sleeping mat, providing herself with food and shelter. This demonstrates her ability to assess her surroundings and apply knowledge about her home environment to an unfamiliar one. Initially, Inga's ability to reason, make decisions, and utilize her skills in order to survive makes her a strong lead character for readers to identify with. However, Inga's courage and reasoning disappear when the "skraelings" or "Bear People" are present. "Skraeling" is a Norse term for Native people. Generally, Viking relationships with Native people were poor, and the Vikings viewed them as inferior, savage people. During Inga's first encounter with the Bear People she faints from fear; when she wakes up she finds a basket of food, presumably left for her by those same people. The baskets of food continue to appear, and rather than use the reasoning skills she demonstrated earlier to determine that the people she encountered were leaving her food, Inga is mystified and decides that an unknown gift-giver must be providing for her needs. This furthers the plot by implying a bit of mystery, and allows Inga to continue her journey with Raven. However, her illogical conclusion is also a major shift in her character, inconsistent with the resourceful, smart girl at the beginning of the story.

Clearly, author L.W. van Keuren did a great deal of research on Viking culture for this short novel. Specific Norse artifacts are described in great detail, and frequent references to Norse folklore, language, architecture, and culture recreate Inga's world prior to her arrival in Newfoundland, which explains the strong contrast she feels to the culture she is then exposed to when living with the Bear People. However, the

detail regarding Native culture in Newfoundland is not equivalent to what van Keuren offers on Norse culture. For instance, despite Inga's interactions with the Bear People, this Native group is never identified (though the back cover indicates the Bear People are Inuit). As a result, the reader must rely on cultural references and knowledge of Newfoundland history to identify them. A reader familiar with Aboriginal history in Newfoundland can deduce which people are involved in this fictional encounter. The skin boats that Inga encounters at the Bear People's camp are a clue that these people are late Paleo-Eskimos, most likely Dorset, precursors of the Thule and their descendants, the Inuit,<sup>1</sup> and the historical link may be based on the Viking sagas in which there are references to Eskimo skin boats and war slings. However, it is likely that the descriptions in the Viking sagas were based on Viking knowledge of Greenland Eskimos, not Aboriginal people from Newfoundland.<sup>2</sup> Other cultural references such as clothing made of white bear fur, artifacts carved of ivory, and the use of whale blubber describe Western stereotypes of a northern Native group, and might lead a reader to assume that the people in the story are predecessors of today's Inuit. However, for young readers who may not have been exposed to the prehistory of Newfoundland, the lack of clear identification creates a stereotypical and standardized image of Native peoples.

Van Keuren's attempt to create a piece of historical fiction about an early Viking encounter on Newfoundland is plausible as a piece of lost history. The story itself is not unlike work by other authors, such as Newfoundland author Joan Clark's *The Dream Carvers*. In Clark's story a young Viking protagonist is lost in Newfoundland and taken in by a Native tribe, despite the protagonist's negative opinions about the Natives. The protagonist then learns that his assumptions were misguided, and chooses to become part of the tribe. The end of Clark's story, like van Keuren's, results in a choice between returning home and staying. In both stories, the protagonist ends the story by identifying with both cultures, having become part of both worlds. Van Keuren adds to this type of story by detailing Norse artifacts and culture with such a high level of authenticity that the accuracy of the information about the Vikings is not to be doubted. At times, however, the story focuses on detailing historical artifacts and events to the point of neglecting the actual plot. Also, her research about early Newfoundland and Labrador indigenous peoples and their culture and nomadic lifestyle may have been less thorough because I often felt confused about who Inga actually encountered, as I wanted the same attention to historical detail that was so evident with the descriptions of Norse culture. That said, the story may have been written to express a mainly Norse perspective of an encounter with Newfoundland Aboriginal people through the protagonist's point of view. If this is indeed the case, the one-sided cultural viewpoint would have been more effective if the story had been written in the first person. Overall, *Raven, Stay by Me* has lots of adventure, a likeable and smart lead character, and lots of detail about Norse culture; but occasional artifacts that appear

forced into the plot, along with discrepancies in detailing other cultures and histories, results in a somewhat underdeveloped plot about European reconciliation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Olive Patricia Dickason with David T. McNab, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52, 63-64.

<sup>2</sup>Ingeborg Marshall, *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 263.

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Michael Winter, *The Death of Donna Whalen*. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton Canada, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-670-0663-6.

EARLIER IN HIS CAREER, Michael Winter frequently ran into trouble over the autobiographical quality of his fiction, which was filled with thinly veiled portraits of incidents involving family and friends. As Winter has mentioned in a number of interviews, those around him became acutely aware of, and sometimes strenuously objected to, his professional eavesdropping. Well, it seems that old habits die hard, because Winter's latest novel, *The Death of Donna Whalen*, while taking a turn towards the documentary, is in some ways an extended exercise in eavesdropping (for much of the book, quite literally). The novel, which was shortlisted for the Rogers Writers Trust Fiction Prize, revisits the murder of a young woman in St. John's in the 1990s and consists of statements by and conversations between those involved in the case, including wiretaps of various witnesses and suspects. In his foreword to the novel, Winter describes his initial temptation to write about the murder in the documentary fiction mode of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, but admits that he developed reservations about taking a true story, especially a graphically violent one that had a dramatic impact on so many lives, and capitalizing on "someone's tragedy for personal gain." After he shelved all his research, however, the voices from the case kept calling to him and ultimately convinced him that the story offered "a wedge into the human condition that was truer and more vivid than what I could fabricate." The result: *The Death of Donna Whalen: A Novel*.

Because Winter respectfully turns the telling of the story over to those who were involved in the murder and the subsequent trial, the question of how this is a *novel* is a good one, and it doesn't entirely go away. Winter has, though, adapted the raw material of the case in a number of significant ways. The segments of narration and dialogue that constitute the novel have been selected from a much larger body