

Book review: Two sets of stories from a former Alaskan explore northern life and questions of identity

By [Nancy Lord | Alaska books](#)

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“Trouble Will Save You: Three Novellas”

By David Nikki Crouse; University of Alaska Press, 2023; 191 pages; \$18.95.

“I’m Here: Alaskan Stories”

By David Nikki Crouse; Boreal Books/Red Hen Press, 2023; 192 pages; \$16.95.

The publication of two books in one year is either an impressive achievement or a fluke of timing. Whichever the case may be, David Nikki Crouse’s short and shorter fictions are overdue and very welcome additions to contemporary literature. Set primarily in the Fairbanks area, these two books present modern-day Alaska and Alaskans in all the beauty, despair, and complexity they — and readers — deserve.

Crouse formerly lived in Fairbanks, receiving an MFA writing degree from the University of Fairbanks in 1996 and teaching there. The author of two previous, award-winning short fiction collections, Crouse currently directs the creative writing program at the University of Washington in Seattle, where their biography states, “They are a transgender/genderqueer writer interested in questions of identity and its relationship to the natural world.”

All of Crouse’s stories in these two books, in fact, deeply observe both inner and outer landscapes. The characters involved operate on the margins of society and/or are caught in traumatic situations; there are reasons they live in edge places like the outskirts of Fairbanks or are in some kind of transition between lives or circumstances. They struggle with weather and balky vehicles, and with who they are. They tell stories, they lie, they live in their imaginations. They leave places, partners, and family and return to them.

The three novellas each feature well-realized women as their central characters; each is a fascinating study of human behavior under stress. Each story’s construction mimics the crazily imaginative minds of the women; distorted time sequences disorient the reader as well as the character. The effect is three wild rides in which every element, every scene, builds from intrigue and confusion into resolutions rich in understanding and empathy.

In the first, “Misfortune and Its Double” a young couple has left Fairbanks for jobs in the Lower 48. In the opening scene, a kind man buys the couple a restaurant meal. “That small kindness

happened ten days into the trip, when our trouble sometimes seemed like an exotic country we were visiting as wide-eyed tourists.” There’s been an accident, an injury. We gradually become aware that the mind of the traumatized Wendy, beginning back in Canada and lurching down the highway, may not be translating reality. We’re back and forth in time, in place, in and out of imagination. The road trip and the tension between what is and what might be, propel this story in surprising, illuminating directions.

The second story begins with a disturbed woman on the phone to a crisis line, awaiting the arrival of Fairbanks police. We gradually learn that a current upset in her life has triggered an old trauma. “She remembered it now as if it was happening again, his boot on the side of the boat and then his arms reaching out. Then he was falling sideways and his face didn’t even have time to register his fear.” Crouse’s compassionate depiction of a mental health crisis and its aftermath exemplify the power of fiction to share and understand the lives of others.

In the third story, the owner of a comic shop organizes Dungeons & Dragons games. “Being a dungeon master is close to godhood. I stand outside the action, but my presence is found in everything. I’m the voice of every monster and barmaid, the scheme of every villain, and the sage advice of every friendly wizard they meet along the journey.” Highly imaginative, Kim extends her role into the lives of the youthful players, including a young Native man who has gone missing and a teenage girl who kissed him as part of the game. Time folds back upon itself, and a cold Fairbanks winter permeates the scenes and language.

In the separate collection “I’m Here,” the 12 stories feature a wider variety of characters — outsiders, outcasts, failures in enterprises or relationships, in confused or oppositional states, literally in the woods, in flight. As with the novellas, identity is a key ingredient. Who am I, and who am I to others? Some of this has to do with gender and sexuality, others with relationships with parents, partners, and strangers. There are lots of secrets in these stories, lots of infidelities and disappointments. These are largely dark stories in which the characters nonetheless seek and often find not just purpose but joy.

In the first story, a teenage girl has flown to Fairbanks to visit her father, “the kind of man who had to run to the edge of the world to find himself” and who was dying of cancer. In another, another teenage girl is hauled to Alaska by a mother fleeing her marriage. In yet another, an aging and delusional woman relives her youth as a welder on the Alaska pipeline and a time in which she confronted men shooting at wolves.

In “The Alaska Girl,” a man in Massachusetts, in marital and financial crisis, has fixated on an internet relationship with a girl in Sitka. He likely knows she’s not real but fantasizes about her anyway, sending and receiving texts. As he goes about his day, which involves avoiding a banker and buying expensive things he can’t afford, he’s also texting a girlfriend with whom he’s feuding and another woman he’s recently met. He’s caught in a crazy trap of his own making.

Altogether, the fictive worlds that Crouse shares in these two books are vibrantly alive with possibility and the consequences of being human. Readers will be tossed through mysteries and emotions, wrapped in piercing, sensual language, and come away with new appreciations of our

shared place and time. The best fiction does that — takes us away and then back, to better know ourselves.

Crouse will serve on the faculty of the Kachemak Bay Writers Conference in 2024.