Book Review

Richard Chiappone’s 'Uncommon Weather' exposes the emotional toll of Alaska life

David James
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner
February 9, 2025

The myth is this. Alaska is a big land, challenging its residents in big and heroic ways. The open country, extreme climate, abundant and sometimes dangerous wildlife, and geographical isolation from the world at large demand physical stamina and ingenuity in order to survive. It’s an Alaska first immortalized by Jack London, and one that has forever since remained the dominant image of the state in popular consciousness.

The reality is this. Alaska is a big land of cities and towns that challenge their residents in small and often insidious ways. The claustrophobic sense of entrapment, often relentlessly bad weather, sometimes dangerous fellow citizens, and the boredom of social isolation from the rest of society demand emotional stamina and an ability to stumble through life, figuring out survival along the way.

This is the Alaska that longtime Homer author Richard Chiappone stakes his claim on in “Uncommon Weather,” his recently published short story collection. An Alaska where the biggest challenge isn’t staying alive out on the land. It’s staying sane within one’s own home.

“You hear more and more these days about climate change, unusual storms all over the world. But let me tell you, it’s the weather inside a house that matters,” the unnamed narrator in the book’s title story declares, reflecting on a life spent in a dry cabin off the grid, where the world has grown warmer and her marriage colder. “Global warming may bring us a whole new earth, but the sun still rises and sets in the same old ways.”

These words encapsulate the Alaska that Chiappone captures in differing stories revolving around a common theme. Each one drops in on a day or so in the broken

lives of its characters who struggle to make sense of their surroundings, and of the choices made by themselves or others that have led them to the moments Chiappone puts to the page before leaving them to their devices and moving on. None of the stories truly resolve, because none of the lives he presents here will reach resolution. Each will simply move onward until they can no longer move at all. But that ending usually lies beyond the last sentence of these tales.

It begins with the book's first story, "Xtratuf," set in Chiappone's hometown of Homer, in the waning days of the pandemic. Phil, the central character, is an aging but not yet quite old resident caretaking his heavily pierced, tattooed, dyed-haired 15-year-old granddaughter Melanie, the only child of his son, who took his own life a week after her birth. Severe mental illness runs in his family, and Melanie is herself a victim, her own struggles compounded by drug use. He's paid for her rehab and taken her in, removing her from her far from reliable mother.

Melanie has been the victim of a simple crime. Her boots have been stolen from the local wellness center where Phil has sent her to partake in mindfulness practice, something she's hopelessly ill-equipped for. As she navigates her new life in Alaska, she reveals to Phil the unwelcome realities of the place where he has made his stand in life, and where he has been left alone, abandoned by his family. During his years there, Homer has moved in a new and uneasy direction, leaving Phil adrift in a slowly fraying town that isn't such a good place for kids anymore, and where there's little hope that Melanie or Phil will find the redemption each so desperately need.

In "Mammoth," one of the few stories set in a remote corner of Alaska, we meet Jack and Mary, an unlikely couple rafting the Noatak River at summer solstice, struggling with the emerging difficulties in their still new relationship. Jack is angry with Mary for what he perceives as her inability to properly prepare for such an endeavor, but it's his own poor decision, made in a moment of unexpected discovery, that will trigger the incident that mars their journey and endangers their lives. The relationship is surely doomed, but here we only find the incident that will lead to its unraveling.

In the book's longest story, "Time on the Water," we encounter Alan. Divorced out of his marriage, downsized out of his job and diagnosed out of his health, he's left with nothing but a cabin in Anchor Point and a decision to spend his remaining time fishing. His plans are waylaid, however, by a teenage girl who bumbles into his life, asking him to help her rob the local gas station. With little left to live for, he accepts the offer and finds himself drawn into a complex con in a small town where children and adults alike sooth the dullness of their lives by toying with others. It leads Alan to a dark place from which escape becomes impossible.

I've long contended that Anchorage, Alaska's largest and most complex city, has been denied its proper place in the state's literature. It's a void Chiappone steps into three times over with stories that delve into the city's poverty, homelessness, cultural divides, and transitory nature. His characters encounter the emptiness of its busy streets, the dark secrets lingering behind its doors, and the futility of trying to change things. It's hardly a complete picture of an often vibrant metropolis, but in a book plumbing the subsurface of several of the state's communities, it's an overdue recognition that the sprawling conurbation that dominates it in both size and influence is as distinctively Alaskan as any of its other towns.

The stories Chiappone presents in "Uncommon Weather" tell of helplessness in a world sliding away from its characters' grips. They struggle to find the emotional stamina to withstand it. Some succeed to some small degree, others don't. It's not the Alaska of popular myth. It's the Alaska of hard-lived reality. And in Chiappone's compassionate hands, it's a deeply human Alaska, where the true struggles of survival in the far north are found.