

Who Owns this Place Anyway?

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I recently read Mary Catherine Martin's critique of Dave Eggers' Heroes of the Frontier in the 49 Writers blog. I appreciate her heartfelt complaint about how much of Alaska Eggers gets wrong, particularly the Alaskan fauna. I've heard similar complaints about TC Boyle (Drop City), David Vann (Legends of a Suicide and Caribou Island). We can go all the way back to Jack London if we want. Yep, all of them drop the ball from time to time on critical issues of Alaskan geography, flora and fauna, and most importantly on us Alaskans and our foibles.

Some years ago, the writers of Northern Exposure visited Fairbanks and sat still for a question and answer session with UAF English and theatre students. Immediately the students, especially the Native students, jumped in on all the things the writers got wrong about us. And they were met with a shrug. The writers didn't plan to change a thing based on these criticisms of what we considered essential details of our people and place. The Hollywood writers simply told us that the show had its own reality and that reality trumped the reality we knew, the reality they could see right out the window. It was obvious they weren't going to look.

If you are a Lower Forty-eighter, you might very well look at our vast state and see a blank canvas just waiting to be painted on. Clearly, Jack London thought just that. Admittedly, he spent very little time here, but what grabbed him was a sense of emptiness, an existential blankness that all the open country suggested. Perfect, the perfect backdrop for his existential tales done in broad strokes. Let's face it, that's why people keep reading Jack London; they're not reading for verisimilitude. And really, fellow Alaskans, when we read London aren't we doing the same thing?

Is it any different for Dave Eggers, David Vann or TC Boyle? Sitting on the deck of Pike's Landing looking south to the Alaska Range, mustn't they have thought, what a wonderfully empty place just waiting to be filled up with their characters and questions?

Wait a minute, we want to say. This isn't such an empty place. We live here. Some of us, or at least our families, have lived here for decades, for centuries. Don't we have a higher claim on this place than some Outsider cruising through?

I want to say two things about this problem of the ownership and the precision or lack thereof of writing about a place: 1) In the long run the details may not matter. 2) It's impossible not to impose our own views onto this or any other place where we live or where we've been. And I would ask if it can ever be otherwise?

Here's a strange metaphor: According to science writer Dennis Overbye, each of us is, in fact, the center of the universe. Each person stands looking into the heavens or just across the room for that matter. What we see, whether it's coming from a

distant star or from fifteen feet away, is traveling on waves of light. And it takes some time for light to make its way to us. So everything we see has happened in the past. And every one of us is seeing the world, the universe through our own peculiar point of view be it that distant star or the people and places we love.

For this reason a writer like Jane Austen can write novels about young single women whose greatest concern in life is finding the man they'll marry. The Napoleonic Wars are raging on the continent, but soldiers in the world of Pride and Prejudice aren't considered as potential cannon fodder but rather marriage prospects. In Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, we're allowed to witness Dilsey and her extended family heroically holding their employers the Compson family together, but we don't get to follow them home to see what their lives are like in their own shabby shacks. We see what the writer wants us to see. As I recede from the words and world of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, I begin to wonder if the problems in contemporary Mississippi grow out of that world: Faulkner's portrait of Dilsey's family is at bottom sentimental, and his treatment of the rising white underclass Snopeses is mostly disdainful. These two groups of people were on a collision course that I ask myself if Faulkner might have anticipated and addressed. But as much as Jane Austen, he was a prisoner of his time and his own attitudes.

Like Austen and Faulkner, we, centers of our very own subjective universes, cannot help but build our own selected version of the reality we want to represent on the page. Yes, we know there are no deer in interior Alaska and we know there are no moose on those costal islands. But I'd argue that as important as getting these facts as right as we can that the story we feel we're compelled to tell must matter more. And I'd have to argue that to ring true it must be our own story.

We can't help offering a subjective version of this world. All we can do is be aware of our subjective take on the world even as we're writing it, and try to come at it as honestly and accurately as possible. I think Mary Catherine Martin would agree. We'll each have to ask ourselves whether our latest Outsider passing through comes up to that mark.