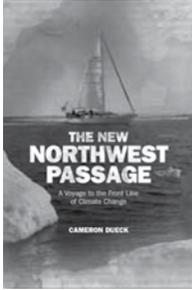


REVIEWS



Cameron Dueck, **The New Northwest Passage: A Voyage to the Front Line of Climate Change** (Winnipeg: Great Plains, 2012). Paperback, 256 pages, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Frieda Esau Klippenstein

What is so fascinating about Cameron Dueck's book *The New Northwest Passage* is not only that, in a single open season, someone could actually navigate a tiny little boat through that historically confounding "shortcut" from Europe to Asia, but also that it could be done by such an ordinary guy.

It was easy to feel a connection with Dueck, with his familiar Mennonite last name, and his hailing from the tiny hamlet of Riverton, Manitoba. That cultural proclivity to make a family connection aside (did I mention that my grandmother was a Dueck? And that her daughter, my aunt, settled in Riverton?), the general reader will quickly be sucked in to identifying with this amateur sailor and adventurer. Partly it's his homespun sailing skills and self-deprecating ways that make you want to hold your breath for him as he spirits his way through the crushing ice floes. But way beyond that, it is Dueck's ability as a writer that makes his book grab attention.

Reminiscent of the early days of "travel literature," Dueck's book carries the armchair reader along on a voyage to the North Pole, or at least very close—to those strange lands that most of us never expect to see with our own eyes. It's the land of the Inuit, the walrus, and the polar bear. For those of us whose childhood history books captured imagination, it's also the land of Sir John Franklin, Roald Amundsen,

and John Rae; of persistent rumours and unsolved mysteries; of lost men and the abandoned ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. It is easy to believe that, despite his extensive reading and consultations with experienced sailors, Dueck's expectations for his adventure were more romantic than realistic. This works in his favour. There is a brilliant intensity in the descriptions of the changing scenery, of life on-board the ship, and especially of the people and communities at stops along the way.

Dueck grabs the reader's attention by starting his story six weeks into the action and then cleverly weaving in the back story. He achieves immediacy through such techniques as quoting from his ship's logs, written in vivid real time and present tense. One of the passages, for instance, takes the reader through a typical, exhausting night shift at the helm. Likewise, instead of simply describing all the colourful people he meets, he replays character-revealing conversations. Sixteen full-colour photo pages of the people and places described confirm the word pictures, and two maps at the front of the book help the reader trace the progress of the expedition.

This is a book of wide-eyed first impressions. Readers will appreciate that this is the writer's first crack at this monumental nautical challenge and that the chances of success are slim. There is humour and a likeable naïveté in how Dueck describes buying the forty-foot sloop and selecting his three-person crew. Having lost all of his original recruits between six and two months before setting sail, he scrambled to regroup. He settled ("sight unseen") on Ann, a female filmmaker from Montreal who admittedly "had never sailed"; on Tobias, a medical doctor turned Chinese cosmetics company employee, similarly unsullied by experience at sea; and (thankfully) on Hanns, a professional sailor from Germany, still in his 20s, whom Dueck had never met. Although the hopelessly seasick Ann had to be flown home at first opportunity, Dueck and remaining crew ultimately solve the

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endless problems at sea remarkably well.

And there are problems at sea. Besides the everyday challenge of struggling against the elements, there are paperwork and border issues to work out, communication and navigation troubles, not to mention serious mechanical problems and even disease (shouldn't have eaten that grizzly bear meat!). On top of it all are the inevitable personality clashes of people in way-too-close quarters—people with equal wishes to live, but unequal ability to make the decisions. Dueck refers to the enduring clash with his first mate in respectful, understated ways, but it does come to a crisis point, in any case, approximately two-thirds of the way through the trip. (Mutiny at sea!) Through it all, Dueck swings between courageous confidence and nagging self-doubt.

However idealistic Dueck may have been when he launched out from Victoria harbour on June 6, 2009, he certainly does not overlay his descriptions with sepia tones. True to what he sees, his pages reveal northern communities that are not so natural, traditional, and pristine. He describes communities in the unkind grasp of “progress,” marked by the malaise of government-funded social programs, overpriced junk food, and the ubiquitous bootlegged booze. They are populated by bored teenagers on ATVs, migrant oilfield workers, and people hooked on Wi-Fi, video games, and satellite TV. But in every port are also people who treat the strangers with remarkable acts of kindness and hospitality. Dueck is both an adventurer and a cultural observer. But Dueck the journalist is always close at hand. Woven throughout the book are the facts and figures, the context and comparison points, and why the thing matters in the first place.

And what matters most is the narrative behind the narrative. This is ultimately much more than a story of a not-really-so-ordinary guy pulling into port in Halifax in the drizzle of an October morning after a bracing sailing adventure. It's a gripping account of the “new” Northwest Passage, which has allowed ships to pass in the last few years only because of warming temperatures and the shrinking northern ice cap. How unique, remarkable, and fleeting this moment is will be most appreciated in time—and in a remarkably short time, if scientists' predictions for a warmer North are true. Dueck's book reveals that the North is not nearly so inaccessible and remote as we think. But the great white north that we've always imagined may be gone forever. **R**

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Patrick Friesen, **A dark boat** (Vancouver: Anvil, 2012). Paperback, 120 pages, \$16.00.

Reviewed by Joanne Epp

Patrick Friesen's latest poetry collection is small, almost pocket-sized. The long, meditative lines that characterize much of his previous work are replaced here by intense, compact pieces full of mingled lights and shadows.

This collection is steeped in the influence of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. The writing is rooted in earth, in the elements. It's strongly tied to the body, to movement and emotion, and especially to the way they're expressed through music: “in triana the dancer / with her long fingers / calling out grief and exile.”

Illogical leaps and surprising images are also evocative of Lorca's style. “rua azul” asks “and where were you when / the only street ran through you?” and declares: “there's so much architecture / in the lonely gestures // in the words you've heard . . .” (13). Then there's the slightly surreal “both sides of the door,” in which “october enters your bed” (44). The dream-like tone results not only from the choice of imagery, but also from the sense Friesen gives of being in places that are at once familiar and strange: “jittery I turn around / in this place where / someone turned around / before” (15). It's a state where every sensory impression is arresting and every story feels timeless.

Lorca's incantatory style is present, too, though

A persistent, deep-seated longing runs through this book.