What the Bear Said: Skald Tales of New Iceland
by W.D. Valgardson

Reviewed by Sally Ito

What the Bear Said: Skald Tales of New Iceland is a collection of fourteen tales by W.D. Valgardson. Told in the compelling voice of a seasoned story-maker, the tales bring to life the ‘folk’ ways of the early settlers in the Icelandic Canadian community in Manitoba. Valgardson, born in 1939, states in his preface that he grew up hearing stories around the kitchen table. The stories generally centred on “commercial freshwater fishing in the Interlake area and the other, the Icelandic community in the Interlake and beyond” but also bore “fragments of Icelandic folk tales.” The combination of a new land being interpreted with the imaginative and mythical framework of the old in the manner of the tale is what gives this collection a certain narrative frisson delectably and delightfully Canadian.

The title story gives us the classic boreal encounter of bear with human. However, this is no ordinary human, but Gusti, an Icelander, who has likely never seen a bear before (Iceland does not have bears). Gusti speaks with this bear. An unreported conversation, but one that left him with the “memory of swirling dark clouds, a sensation of something primitive, stirring something within him, memories of ancient times, faint images that appeared and faded so quickly he could not really say what he had seen” (5). Gusti is a poet and is sensitive to the spirit worlds of other creatures; he is the kind of man who can have a communicative relationship with animals in a way others cannot. And so it is when Gusti’s beloved daughter Ninna goes missing that the bear plays a role in her recovery.

Other mystical encounters of the ‘folk’ with the wildlife appear in such tales as “Ingrid of the Lake,” a story of a young woman and a sturgeon, and “Halldor Vitlaus,” a story of a man who has shot a wolf without reason. Told in quick, easy prose, the stories nonetheless present their moral and psychological dilemmas squarely. When the community finds out that Halldor has senselessly killed an animal, they question him about it. “Halldor just shrugged. He would have told them why if he had known, but he didn’t know” (42). Ingrid, of “Ingrid of the Lake,” has fallen under the spell of the sturgeon. She confesses to the minister, citing the only possible biblical connection of Jonah and the Whale as a means of ‘explaining’ her attraction. But such a story is remotely unconnected and cannot help her; she must undergo an exorcism.

Besides the wildlife, there are other creatures, like the trolls, the ghosts, and the huldufolk – hidden people – that travel with the Icelanders to their new country. In “Loftur,” a ghost follows a couple to the shores of Lake Winnipeg; a somewhat comic figure, his meddling in their lives is not as effective in the new country and at last, the couple makes peace with him in their new and enlightened circumstances. Not only are the spirits and creatures of Iceland present, but so, too are the spirits of the Aboriginal people, like Wendigo in the eponymously named tale in the collection.

What the Bear Said is a masterful array of tales by a skilled artist and storyteller. Accessible and engaging, it artfully combines elements of the tale or fable with the modern short story to re-interpret the lives of the early Icelandic Canadian settlers of Manitoba. A multicultural cross-genre work, it heralds a new hybrid form of Canadian literature, well worth reading and emulating. ♦
Sally Ito is a writer, editor, teacher, and translator living in Winnipeg with her husband and two children. Her most recent book is the poetry collection *Alert to Glory* (Turnstone Press, 2011).

Buy *What the Bear Said* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9780888013804/w-d-valgardson/bear-said?blnBKM=1