In the Hands of Anubis
by Ann Eriksson

Reviewed by Alissa Schacter

The unorthodox friendship between a young man and an old woman provides the grist for In the Hands of Anubis, the second novel by writer and biologist Ann Eriksson.

Eriksson brings her keen eye for detail and palpable passion for the natural world to this story about Trevor Wallace, a staid thirty-something tractor salesman who crosses paths with Constance Ebenezer, a lively old lady embarking on a solo trip around the world, her bags packed with highly peculiar contents. Initially Trevor is an unwilling companion for Constance when they get stuck in Cairo for three days after missing a connecting flight to Nairobi. But Constance shares her unusual mission with Trevor, rousing his interest and eventually creating a bond between them. When Trevor returns home to Calgary, he finds the experience has changed him and he is no longer satisfied with the well-entrenched routines of his orderly life. He begins to agitate the equilibrium, starting with his occasional relationship with Angela, an overworked lawyer about whom he knows very little. As life takes some unexpected twists and turns, Trevor finds himself invoking Constance's spirit and her parting words to him to “Take chances” (81).

The title of the novel refers to Anubis, a canine-headed ancient Egyptian god who was believed to guide and protect the soul on its journey to heaven. Trevor and Constance come across a statue of Anubis in an Egyptian museum. Animals appear throughout the novel as iconic beacons; Eriksson suggests that the universe offers us many guides in life, some human and some animal, but we must be attentive enough to recognize them.

Eriksson deftly captures both the tangible details of the corporeal world and the ethereal nuances of the spiritual one with skill and grace. She is at her finest when writing about the natural world. Born in Saskatchewan and raised in rural communities across the prairies, Eriksson clearly has extensive first-hand experience with her subject matter; her descriptions of the prairie landscape, which figure prominently in the book, are beautifully drawn and lyrical:

Trevor hiked an endless plain. With each step, spear grass bent under his feet and the smell of sage lifted on the warm wind. In the distance a herd of bison grazed. Daisies waved their heads in the breeze and carpets of flax and beard-tongue rolled into the
distance with the land. . . . At the rise, a cairn of stones, red with iron, directed his gaze into the cobalt canopy of sky where cotton ball clouds circled over his head. (115)

She is equally eloquent when writing about wild animals:

The water in front of the boat bubbled and fell away as a dense dark mass rose up and slid across the sea like a giant snake. Baxter and Trevor could see the pleated throat, the massive callused head – one eye searching, watching them – the stunted dorsal fin and the long fluted pectorals. The tail flukes curved up and over the heads of the men and sent a cascade of shining seadrops down in a glistening curtain. Then the giant vanished without a sound. (213)

In contrast to the fine point Eriksson uses to delineate the physical world, she paints Trevor’s relationship with Angela in broad brush strokes. The novel would have benefited from Eriksson’s devoting more attention to the evolution of this significant relationship. However, she provides a rich context and sufficient background on each character to allow the reader to fill in the blanks.

Eriksson uses a series of flashbacks and dream sequences to elicit formative events in the characters’ lives. As the novel progresses, the characters must reconcile their past experiences to move forward.

The novel speaks fluently about both the physical and the spiritual realms and offers a quiet reminder of the inter-connection between them. It intimates that in our search for meaning, we must look beyond the trappings of our modern lives to nature’s transcendent truths. At its heart, In the Hands of Anubis is a moving story about what can happen when we are prepared to take risks and open ourselves up to embracing life’s possibilities.

Alissa Schacter is a Winnipeg writer. She has worked as a lawyer and in economic development and policy.

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