

Author and journalist Lori Tobias is ready to 'Wander'

By DAN HAAG

"Wander," the debut novel by Oregon Coast Today columnist and former Oregonian staff writer Lori Tobias, opens with a tantalizing hint of what is to follow:

"In our little village of Wrassell, in the middle of nowhere, Alaska, we saw all kinds of prizes beckoning on the horizon, and we couldn't wait to get there... By the time that winter was over, three of us would be dead, another forever lost, and all of us changed."

The novel is set against the backdrop of an unforgiving Alaskan winter, and the story deals with love and heart-wrenching loss.

Though challenging, Tobias says she enjoys the freedom of fiction as opposed to her 25 years of researching and writing news stories. "With journalism you have the facts and data and you choose how to tell it," she says. "In fiction, there are no boundaries."

The novel's main character, Pete, is faced with many harsh realities as the story opens. An East Coast transplant to the small Alaskan village, she's a young radio reporter struggling to impress at work and fit into her new surroundings.

She's also coming to grips with five months alone in a very big, very cold place while her husband — a bush pilot — looks for a bigger payday working on the Alaskan oil fields, aka "the slope."

Onto this stage of uncertainty comes Ren, a stranger with an Ivy League background. Ren's presence gives Pete cause to ponder the direction of her life as the two connect. As the story unfolds, however, we find that Ren has come to Alaska with his own agenda.

When it comes to choosing the novel's setting, Alaska was the logical choice for Tobias, who spent eight years there beginning at age 18.



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Lori Tobias covered the Oregon Coast for The Oregonian until 2013. She lives in Newport.

Though the town of Wrassell is fictional, it is indicative of Alaska's rural settings.

"Alaska is a vast, exciting, interesting and complex place," Tobias says. "There were a lot of things that really impacted me during that time."

In many ways Pete's routines are a reflection of Tobias' time in Alaska, such as working at an oldies radio station and living in a



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"Wander" is the first novel by Lori Tobias.

remote, rural setting.

Likewise, much of the action that happens to Pete in "Wander" is taken from Tobias' actual experiences, including driving across a frozen lake alone and having ice break under her car as well as a brush with the local wildlife: One morning at Tobias' Alaskan cabin, she came downstairs to find an

immense bull moose staring at her through the window, a moment she describes as "unnerving."

While the book is only 152 pages, the length is perfect for the story that needed to be told. "I didn't see any point in padding it just to get extra pages," Tobias says.

In addition to real settings and experiences, "Wander" is full of razor-sharp dialogue that makes the compact book an addicting page-turner.

Tobias says she learned the art of creating memorable dialogue from her writing instructor Tom Jenks, former short story editor at Esquire magazine.

"He taught me dialogue is a sword fight; it should be more than just relaying information," she says.

Now, Tobias is busy lining up presentations to promote the book; in September, she will read "Wander" at gigs in Greenwich Village, New York and Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Locally, a reading at the Hoffman Center in Manzanita is set for Oct. 21.

While Tobias admits to initially being terrified of speaking to audiences, she now looks forward to the give-and-take, where she says people have been receptive and encouraging.

Next for Tobias is a memoir on her 10 years covering the Oregon Coast for The Oregonian — which is currently with an editor — and a rough draft of her next novel.

For now, she hopes that readers will enjoy "Wander" and take away important lessons about the human condition.

"People can love each other and still make mistakes; everything isn't perfect in life," she says. "We never know what some people are going through, so be kind, love and forgive."

"Wander" is on shelves now.

To order a copy or find out where Lori Tobias will be appearing locally, visit www.loritobias.com

Cannon Beach Gallery show tells stories through clay

CANNON BEACH — The Cannon Beach Gallery's newest exhibit, "Narrative Ceramic Sculpture," will open with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 3.

The exhibition features works by ceramicists Wesley Anderegg, Akio Takamori, Michelle Gallagher, Jacqueline Hurlbert, Margaret Keelan, Heidi Preuss Grew, Babette Harvey, and husband-and-wife-team Robin and John Gumelius. Each of these artists explore narrative, creating sculptures that engage the audience and invite personal interpretation. Each piece has evident or implied narrative, drawing on the artists' individual real-life experiences or imagined

worlds. The viewer is more than a voyeur; bringing their own viewpoint influenced by their biases and experience of the world, they become an active participant. In this way, each piece has a unique meaning to each and every viewer. This is the power of a story. As it is retold and is translated it becomes the interpreter's own.

However, viewers should tread lightly as they appropriate the artist's work to speak of their own experience and remember that these incarnations are confided in trust. The commentary or confession may have a particular meaning to the artist — one that may never be fully expressed in words.

Grew admits that she

never fully reveals all the themes and ideas she is working with, preferring to allow the viewer some scope for personal interpretation but also keeping a little something for herself.

Both Grew and Takamori's work explores identity through the self and community. Both artists create works in groupings that relate meaning through their juxtaposition and in which the constituent parts are powerful when standing in isolation. Takamori and Grew are familiar with the concept of mixed cultural references — Takamori was born in Japan, and Grew is a first-generation German immigrant. Their works hint at the dichotomy of homoge-

nization and otherness.

Gallagher, Hurlbert and Keelan's work speaks of a preoccupation with change and transformation through aging. Each art piece indulges our desire to return to a more innocent time while acknowledging the darker side of our psyche as we transition from childhood, though puberty, and settle into adulthood. The artworks are also a celebration of the human condition with all its humor, mischief and mayhem.

Anderegg constructs caricatures derived from observances of human behavior and memories. His imagination develops his subjects. He accepts that the personal nature of his work means it has an emotional



SUBMITTED PHOTO

"The Guide" by Heidi Preuss Grew.

quality, but he shies away from being blatant, using humor as a buffer.

Harvey's imagery draws on the natural world, humanity, and environmental issues. Robin and John Gumelius start from a position of sharing. The work is

created through an ongoing dialogue between the two artists, each taking the next chapter in the narrative of their combined creations.

More information can be found at cannonbeacharts.org or by emailing cannonbeacharts@gmail.com