



BOOKMONGER

CHILLING OUT AT 50 BELOW

Memoir tells the story of a teacher in Alaska

As preface to her new memoir, "Life at Fifty Below Zero," author Christina Reagle provides this note: "50° degrees below zero or minus 50 means it is 82° degrees below freezing (Fahrenheit). That is damn cold."

This is why I picked up this book one recent sweltering afternoon, hoping it might fool me into feeling cooler.

In spring 1972, Reagle and her husband were a young Bay Area couple interested in simplifying their lifestyle. Reagle was a teacher and her husband, Jed, was completing his final semester before getting his California teaching license.

On a whim, they met with recruiters who had come to the Bay Area looking for teachers to work in the Alaskan bush. The interview included an unusual question: did they

know what a Honey Bucket was and how to empty one?

They figured teaching in Alaska for a year would be fun. When they got the call, they promptly boxed up their belongings, traded in their Volkswagen and MGB for a Toyota Land Cruiser, and headed up the coast.

When they reached the Alaska ALCAN highway, their trip was made memorable with beautiful scenery, hordes of mosquitoes, flat tires and drenching rain.

"Getting wetter and wetter by the minute, made me realize I agreed to this adventure so it was time to put on my big girl pants

and become positive," Reagle recalls.

They were assigned to a school in a remote

This Week's Book

'Life at Fifty Below Zero' by Christina Reagle
Wild Eagle Publishing — 388 pp — \$18

village on the Yukon River, where the only building that had indoor plumbing (of sorts) was the schoolhouse. Hence the Honey Bucket question.

They threw themselves into village life, participating in local customs such as berry-picking and Slaviq (Russian Orthodox Christmas). They joined in the excitement of following Alaska's first Iditarod that winter. They witnessed the frozen Yukon River break up and flow free again in May.

Reagle was pregnant by the end of their first year. The couple signed on for another year of teaching and transferred to another village.

Reagle stayed in Alaska for 33 years. Her observations are chatty and direct. She covers the experiences of teaching in schools all over Alaska while raising two sons, caring for a growing passel of sled dogs, then reinventing her life as an educational administrator in Juneau after her divorce.

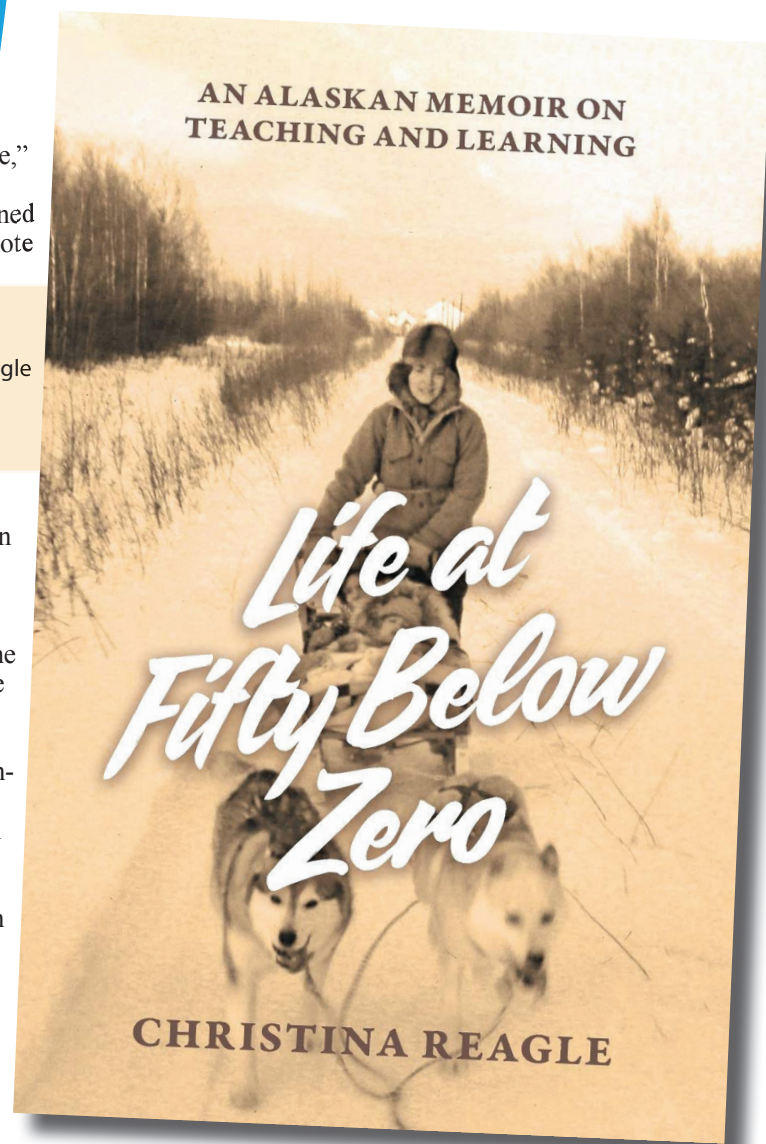
This memoir also discusses the important changes that were taking place in Alaska's education system and society over Reagle's time there. Issues of equity came to the

forefront and missionary-style teaching methods were phased out in favor of more culturally and linguistically relevant methods and curricula. Reagle became deeply involved in promoting this transition.

After her sons were grown, Reagle moved to Oregon and was hired by Western Oregon University.

"Live at Fifty Below Zero" reflects on a full life that has been as much about learning as about teaching. It's a good book to chill out with.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



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