

BACK BAY READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE
SNOW CHILD

A NOVEL

by

Eowyn Ivey



The Path to *The Snow Child*

The day is still vivid in my memory. I was pregnant with our second child and shelving books at Fireside Books, the small, independent bookstore in Alaska where I have worked for many years. The shop sells both new and used books, so we never know what might pass through our hands—rare collectibles, common classics, *New York Times* bestsellers, obscure out-of-print titles. This particular winter evening, it was an inexpensive paperback copy of *The Snow Child*, a children’s picture book of a fairy tale retold by Freya Littledale and illustrated by Alaskan artist Barbara Lavallee.

I wasn’t familiar with the story, so I glanced at the description on the back cover. Then I slid it into its bin. As I walked back to the counter, an unexpected, exhilarating sensation came over me, as if I had discovered the key to a secret door. I went back and pulled the book from the bin and read it quickly from cover to cover. That was the moment I knew.

For as long as I can remember, I have been searching, although as a child I wouldn’t have described it that way. Then it was just reading. *Little House in the Big Woods*. *The Boxcar Children*. *A Wrinkle in Time*. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

As a college student, I began to understand that I was on a quest to find “my” book. I read voraciously—Cormac McCarthy, Louise Erdrich, Jane Austen, David Eddings, Larry

McMurtry, David Guterson, Annie Dillard, Charles de Lint, Larry Watson, Sherman Alexie. Eventually, I believed, on some library shelf or bookstore window display, I would find it. Somewhere was a story that would capture the world in which I lived and imagined.

The thin paperback children's book remained on my shelf behind the counter at Fireside Books for several weeks. With my half-price, used-book discount, it would have cost me \$2. Yet I refused to bring it home. I was nearly finished writing my first novel, and I would not abandon it, I told myself.

But even as I typed away on my unfinished novel, I researched *The Snow Child*. I discovered that it was based on the Russian fairy tale called "Snegurochka," or "The Snow Maiden." I came across a 1916 translation by Arthur Ransome, "Little Daughter of the Snow." I learned that the fairy tale had inspired a play with music by Tchaikovsky and a ballet that was first performed in St. Petersburg in the late 1800s. I discovered many versions, many possible endings. This in itself intrigued me. How could such a simple story lead in so many different directions? Marriage. Death. Perpetual, joyful childhood.

What captivated me about this fairy tale, however, was the landscape and the role that it played in the telling of the story. Black spruce and dark winters spoke of lonely isolation, and the fresh, sparkling snow brought hope and magic.

Growing up in Alaska, I've at times felt a foreigner in the pages of my country's literature. All the books I had read and loved, but not one of them told of my home. The characters didn't live the way we did. They didn't cut their own firewood or hunt their own meals. The setting was never my backyard, where wild forest gives way to rugged mountains and frozen rivers. But the setting of the old Russian fairy was hauntingly familiar.

On some deeper level, however, it was more than just the northern landscape that resonated with me. Around the same time that I first came across the children's fairy tale at the bookstore, I also received word that our unborn child might suffer from a rare genetic disorder that would mean her death within days of being born. After further testing, we were relieved to learn it had been a false alarm, but during those stressful weeks while we waited for the results, I imagined what it would be like to suffer this terrible loss. What kind of heartache would come with loving a child for those many months of pregnancy, only to face mourning in the end?

Just as significantly, as *The Snow Child* began to flit through my imagination, I lost one of my dearest friends to cancer. I was eight months pregnant when I delivered her eulogy in our small town. She was a brilliant young woman, a writer and attorney who left behind a little girl of her own. Once again, I was faced with the agonizing tangle of love and loss, and the inevitability of death.

"Snegurochka" became my new dream. Staying home each day with my newborn daughter, I set aside my first, nearly completed novel, and began writing *The Snow Child*. It consumed me. In the evenings, after the baby had fallen asleep, I read the chapters to my husband and eldest daughter. Each week, I gave the new pages of the manuscript to my mom, a poet and my longtime writing partner.

I also continued to research the fairy tale. A tattered copy of *Russian Lacquer, Legends and Fairy Tales* by Lucy Maxym turned up at the bookstore. Among its pages, I found illustrations of the snow maiden. It was all fuel to my imagination, which seemed to burn with a kind of urgency.

I set the novel in a river valley very similar to the one in which I grew up, but nearly a hundred years earlier, because I

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imagined a more rustic, isolated home for my characters, where cabins were lit by lantern, horse and train were the primary transportation, and Alaska was still a territory of the United States. I used my own experiences of subsistence hunting, trapping, and farming to enrich the novel with details. I found that the earthy, often violent realities of homesteading created wonderful texture contrasted with the ethereal elements of the snow maiden.

And all along, I knew I had at last found what I had been searching for. The fairy tale was the path that would lead readers into my forest, the place where brown bears slumber and lynx prowl, a dark forest where death and love, beauty and fear, loneliness and hope, are inseparable.

This was the story I had been longing to tell my entire life.

I hope you have enjoyed it.

—*Eowyn Ivey*

A conversation with Eowyn Ivey

What's it like working at an independent bookstore?

Fireside Books is on the main street in Palmer, a quaint and kind of artsy small town with a farming background. When I come in Saturday morning, I brew the coffee. (Our motto is “good books, bad coffee,” but it is actually pretty good.) I turn on some Putumayo jazz or folk music. The bookstore is small and packed full, but neat and organized. It somehow manages to feel both cozy and light and airy. The floors and shelves are a golden, varnished wood, and customers who come in say it smells wonderful—books and freshly brewed coffee.

Usually within minutes of my turning on the OPEN sign, a few of my favorite customers come in, like the older man who swaps stories with me about gardening and snowstorms and old-time Alaska. Then a new customer will arrive, like the woman who, when I asked if she needed help finding anything, said, “That’s what I love about a bookstore. If you knew what you were looking for, you’d miss out on half the fun.”

For the rest of the day, I receive new books, shelve, alphabetize, process, and clean used books that customers bring in for credit, help people find and order books, answer phone calls, arrange the weekly IndieBound bestseller display, banter with the customers and my coworkers. Fireside Books attracts some

of the most interesting, thoughtful, diverse people in our community. It is not unusual for several conversations to be going on at once—two teenagers in the young adult section talking about a new manga series, the owner and a customer standing near the counter discussing poetry and politics, two women from the same book club in the bestseller section choosing their next pick, and a mom reading a picture book to her little boy in the children’s section. It is a very stimulating, joyful place.

We’d love to hear the pitch for your novel, if you want to practice on us.

Here’s the funny thing: I *love* hand-selling books. It’s something I take some pride in, being able to match people with a great read. Fantastic titles such as *The Green Age of Asher With-erow* and *Tinkers* would have gone unnoticed in our store if we didn’t literally take them off the shelf and hand them to our favorite customers. And yet... the thought of hand-selling my own book makes me want to hide under the counter; I have this sort of innate discomfort with self-promotion. But it’s something I’m trying to get over, because I am really excited about *The Snow Child* and can’t wait to share it with readers.

I based *The Snow Child* on a Russian fairy tale about an old man and old woman who cannot have a child of their own and so they build one out of snow. When she comes to life, their wish seems to have been answered. While this sounds like a fantastical story, the novel is very grounded in the Alaskan wilderness where I grew up. There’s an interesting contrast between an ethereal, fairy-tale child and the beauty and brutality of life on a homestead. I’ve been fortunate to already have some wonderful reviews and endorsements. It’s been described as dazzling and enchanting, unnerving and honest. Robert Goolrick, the author of *A Reliable Wife*, wrote, “If Willa Cather

and Gabriel García Márquez had collaborated on a book, *The Snow Child* would be it.”

Whew. I guess I can come out from under the counter now.

So The Snow Child is like the Alaskan love child of Gabriel García Márquez and Willa Cather? I think you buried the lede there!

I guess I did bury the lede. It still takes me a few sentences to build up to those grandly self-promoting lines. I physically cringe when I repeat it, not because I’m not incredibly flattered, but because it makes me so uncomfortable.

Let’s try something that might be more comfortable. Let’s hear about your dream window display for The Snow Child.

I don’t know if this is true of all bookstores, but we have this amazingly artistic group of employees, so I can’t wait to see what they do with the display this February. I’m picturing delicate, ornate snowflakes swirling across the front window, and a sort of Russian art deco script announcing the arrival of *The Snow Child*, but I have a feeling Ruth Hulbert, Katie Renn, and Mary Ann Cockle will come up with something better than anything I can imagine. I do know that my dream display includes stacks and stacks of *The Snow Child*, and they would all sell and there would be enough for everyone and not a single one would have to be returned, ever.

How does being a bookseller influence the way you write—or does it?

This is a great, complex question. *The Snow Child* absolutely would not have been born if it weren’t for Fireside Books. But on a more subtle level, working as a bookseller informed me on

trends and markets and what readers want. I can't say it influenced what I wrote—it's a shortcoming of mine that I'm able to write only what I really, really want to write. But it helped me recognize when I had an idea I thought might be exciting to other people, too. Working at Fireside also clarified my taste as a reader and writer. And because I've seen great books sit ignored on the shelves. (For instance, we've had this one copy of *The Great Explorers* by Robin Hanbury-Tenison in almost every major display at Fireside because we all love it, but we can't sell it to save our lives.) I've watched all the changes with self-publishing and e-books, and I know this is a strange, fickle business. That has made me all the more grateful for the support *The Snow Child* already has from other authors, booksellers, sales reps, and Little, Brown.

Will you tell us a little bit about your process as a writer? When did you know you had a novel on your hands? When do you write? What energizes you?

One of the reasons I left the newspaper business and joined Fireside Books is because I wanted more time and energy to write. What I didn't expect is how stimulated I would be by the actual work of bookselling. To be constantly surrounded by all these ideas and stories and art!

I had been trying for years to finish my first novel. But one day I was shelving books in the children's section and I came across a used, inexpensive paperback children's book about a snow child. I quickly read it there in the store, and I just knew. This was it. I became a bit obsessed—researching the original Russian fairy tale and imagining my own version. Though I tried, I could not force myself to finish that first novel.

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By this time, our second daughter had been born. I wrote *The Snow Child* mostly at night after the baby had gone to sleep. I read chapters aloud to my husband and oldest daughter, and then each week I gave a new chapter to my mom, Julie LeMay, who is a poet. I had spent nearly five years working on that unfinished novel. I had a first draft of *The Snow Child* in less than a year. It was an incredible feeling to have that kind of motivation and energy and inspiration. It was this perfect storm of working at Fireside Books, gaining confidence as a writer, and having the support of my family.

What has it been like seeing the publishing process from the other end of the counter?

It's kind of fun, like holding a book in your hand and finally flipping it over so you can see the back cover. It's still the same book, but I am seeing it from a different side. Just like the upcoming dinner at the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association's trade show in Portland. Years ago I attended as a bookseller with Fireside owner Melissa Behnke, and we sat at the author feast. Authors were coming to the table to tell us about their books. This October, I'll be one of the authors, and it's such a thrill! And yet somehow it's also calming. These are my fellow booksellers. I don't feel nervous. I'm looking forward to talking to everybody about... well, books.

Will you create a dinner for us with some of your favorite Alaska authors?

There are so many amazing, diverse writers in Alaska right now, some of whom I've been fortunate enough to share a meal or drink with, and many others I hope to someday. But since

this is hypothetical and my daydream, I'm going to choose authors who are now deceased and so, unfortunately, I will never be able to invite to a real dinner party.

Definitely first on my guest list would be Margaret Murie (1902–2003). Her quietly observant voice in *Two in the Far North* is a constant influence on me as a writer. She was adventurous, kind, self-deprecating, clever, and selfless—everything I admire.

Joseph Enzweiler (1950–2011) was a rugged, independent poet who captured so much loneliness, beauty, and hard work in his poetry. He is the only guest I was fortunate enough to have actually met, at a writing conference. A group of us stood around a campfire on a beach and talked about John Haines's stunning essays and the woes of a poet going on a book tour. But I did not have nearly enough time to visit with him.

Fred Fickett (1837–1928) is one of my research subjects right now. He was a member of an 1885 military expedition that has been called the Lewis and Clark of Alaska. From his journals and letters, he seems like a brave, charming, and funny man. And there is so much he left out of his journals that I want to know.

Dale DeArmond's (1914–2006) wood engravings of Alaskan folklore and mythology are my current inspiration. I have a copy of *Tales from the Dena*, which she illustrated, and I am completely enthralled. I would love to meet her, to be able to tell her how much her artwork has meant to me and to learn everything I could from her about Alaska's mythology.

The dinner party would be a potluck at our home, because that's how we do it around here, but also because I would be curious to see what everyone else would bring. Would Joe bake a cake? Would Fred bring a salted ham?

I would serve a pot of homemade salmon chowder and

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bread fresh out of the oven, and I would have several bottles of wine and some Alaska IPA ale on hand. It would be winter, and there'd be a birch fire in the woodstove. My husband and daughters would be there, too. During the course of the meal, I would ask my guests a thousand questions about their vision of Alaska, their writing and art. But I would never stop to take a single note or photograph because I would want to be wholly in the moment.

Fred and my husband would end up talking about the Copper River; Ms. DeArmond and my youngest daughter would draw bears together. Margaret would insist I call her Mardie, and Joe would bring in more wood for the fire. None of us would want the evening to end. But, inevitably, the guests would file out the door into the black night, my daughters would change into their pajamas, and my husband and I would sit and stare at the empty bottles and piled dishes, but we would be too tired and content to clean up.

This interview originally appeared on NW Book Lovers, a blog by and about authors, librarians, and independent booksellers in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. When Mabel first arrives in Alaska, it seems a bleak and lonely place to her. Does her sense of the land change over time? If so, how?
2. Why are Jack and Mabel emotionally estranged from each other in the beginning of the novel, and how are they able to overcome that?
3. How do Esther Benson and Mabel differ in temperament, and how does their friendship change Mabel?
4. The first time Garrett sees Faina in person is when he spies her killing a wild swan. What is the significance of this scene?
5. In what ways does Faina represent the Alaskan wilderness?
6. Jack and Mabel's only child is stillborn. How does this affect Mabel's relationship with Faina?
7. When Jack is injured, Esther and Garrett move to his farm to help. How does this alter Jack and Mabel's relationship?

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8. Much of Jack and Mabel's sorrow comes from not having a family of their own, and yet they leave their extended family behind to move to Alaska. By the end of the novel, has their sense of family changed? Who would they consider a part of their family?
9. Death comes in many forms in *The Snow Child*, including Mabel giving birth to a stillborn infant, Jack shooting a moose, Faina slaying a swan, a fox killing a wild bird, Jack and Mabel slaughtering their chickens, and Garrett shooting the fox. Why is this one of the themes of the book and what is the author trying to say about death?
10. What do you believe happened to Faina in the end? Who was she?

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A NOVEL

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A NOVEL

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