

The Bear Woman

Karolina Ramqvist

Saskia Vogel, Translator

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Women's stories often must be rescued from the margins of history, as a writer on a difficult research expedition is reminded in Karolina Ramqvist's introspective novel *The Bear Woman*.

A writer with two children is already somewhat overwhelmed when her friend shares with her the hushed story of a 1541 expedition into Canada's interior. Still, a portion of the tale—about a woman marooned on an island as punishment for an affair—captivates her. Despite her friend's request that she not write about the woman, the writer is possessed. She abandons much to pursue understanding: of how the woman, of noble birth and limited experience, managed to survive for almost a year in the wild, and about why is so little preserved of her incredible tale—perhaps the first story of a successful colony in North America. Most of all, she wants to understand “What about her was so absolute that it thwarted everything else.”

Digging through archives and historical documents, and recreating what she can via her own imagination, the writer sets out to tell the woman's story. Throughout the process, she is reminded of how often those who write history have chosen to discount women—and of what an error that is. The noblewoman in question remains unreachable before and after her time on the island because of this silencing, but the writer still chases her through a princess's short stories and the records of an explorer. She formulates a picture: of a girl, left pregnant and alone, facing bears and wolverines, who nonetheless managed to persist. Of a woman, like all women, whose story deserves to be told on its own merit, and not as an irritating footnote to a man's.

A harried writer seeks her footing through a sidelined sixteenth-century tale in the feminist novel *The Bear Woman*.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2022)

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