

★ **The Thickness of Ice****Gerard Beirne**

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Set in the Canadian tundra and propelled by a twenty-five-year-old mystery, Gerard Beirne's exquisite novel *The Thickness of Ice* is a love story that's also about culpability and redemption.

Jack, Wade's best friend and a ladies' man, disappeared twenty-five years ago following Wade's suspicions that his lover, Tess, had switched her affections to Jack. Now solitary at the age of fifty-two, Wade has lived in Churchill, Manitoba, for decades; he works as a grain terminal operator and measures ice. One blustery winter day, he meets Esther, a quirky, upbeat birdwatcher from Winnipeg. Wade falls heedlessly in love. But while Esther cries out the names of wildflowers in the throes of passion, Wade is quiet and trapped—like the wrecked ship, the *Ithaca*, that's lodged within ice. Esther tries to drill below his permafrost to find the truth and set him free.

A slow reveal wends through the intoxicating narrative, which includes gorgeous descriptions of ice fields, snowfall, and the wild, immense Manitoba landscape. Tender moments between people abound. For example, Tess and Wade they start out worlds apart before finding each other inside a stranded, slowly dying whale. Out of death blooms new life. And when Wade and Esther decide to build a home together, log by log, their work also involves tearing down and burning old homes—both literal and metaphorical. They do so against stories of polar bears, rocket launches, and granary operations.

A moving Inuit mythology is also included, reflecting the cultural predicament of the Indigenous communities that Tess comes from. And in the end, the book's cycle of departure and return leads to a thawing out of the cast's truest selves.

Breathtaking and immersive, *The Thickness of Ice* is a snowbound, heartwarming mystery novel marked by love and beauty, friendship and betrayal, and the darkness of the human heart.

ELAINE CHIEW (May / June 2024)

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