

Book Review:

Alaska

by Jana Harris

ALASKA. A Novel.

By Jana Harris.

316 pages, hard cover, \$11.95, Harper & Row, 1980.

Jana Harris' *Alaska* is a fictionalized history, a romance that traces the interwoven stories of four women and one Eskimo man. The first of the four women is Nadia Karimoff or "Small-Lake-Underneath," 1849-1942, a Haida Indian girl, introduced (on the first page of the novel) at age eighteen, as she has just been sold by her recently widowed Russian mistress to the American Yankee Noah York. Nadia is multi-lingual, the educational experiment of the late professor Karimoff. And her black-red Haida tresses become an important clue in the novel.

The second protagonist is Ulla Bjorklund, 1865-1914, whose parents left Sweden for San Francisco when she was five. She is introduced in 1893, as, thinking herself a widow, she heads for Alaska "to find the men that done my Gunnar in" in the gold fields. During her quest for revenge she meets and marries Nadia's son Yo (Vladimir York).

Third is Mrs. Barnett Zimmerman (nee Catherine York), b. 1894, daughter of Ulla and Yo, a vapid social climber married to an equally vapid Seattlite, and wondering,

(Continued on Page Eleven)

● Alaska by Jana Harris

(Continued from Page Two)

like Ulla before her, if she will produce a child after three successive miscarriages, and, like her great grandmother Woman-Always-Wondering, given to shamanistic "visions."

Part IV is told from the viewpoint of the dwarfed, hair-sucking, and mentally unbalanced Eskimo Tommy (adopted by Nadia and idiot-partner of Yo); this is perhaps the least successful part of the book, but it serves to undercut the pretensions of the Zimmermans and show the beginning of the end for Catherine's daughter, Debra Sue.

The final part of the novel covers the years 1959-74 and is told from the viewpoint of Donna Lee Douglas (b. 1950), who does not appear on the family tree that precedes the novel, but whose true identity in this four-generation saga is worked out some pages before the end.

Alaska is a lurid chronology of the sort dear to readers of Harlequin romances and similar tripe. The ladies herein are not the "passionate, indomitable women" the inside front flyleaf would have us think they are. These female protagonists (one hesitates to call them "heroines") are dependent on men financially and psycho-

logically, constantly seek approval from men (pp. 119, 168, 158, 172, 140). They all harbor

active dislike for males; in fact, they tend to bury them, often either actually killing them or precipitating their deaths (pp. 73, 81, 82, 124). At the close of the novel, Donna D. is about to dispose of her father (Ivan, an oil magnate running for governor) — in court, if not with rifle and spade. As one would expect in an atmosphere

of such active dislike, the sex in the novel is often forced or unnatural; in addition, there are many illegitimate children; there are deformed children and fears of more.

Alaska is a formulaic, repetitive book. Each new generation tends to be the same as the last — in more modish clothing, with a few identifying speech patterns (Nej is Ulla's favorite) — but the same.

One cannot fault Harris for her historical research (which she worked on since 1971, while "living periodically" in the Northwest). Most details ring true. But there are a few exceptions: Harris refers to "seal-gut fishnet traps" (p. 115) in Sitka; according to *Indian Fishing* by Hilary Stewart, such traps

would have been made of nettle fiber or cedar bark. She refers to the scarcity of non-local foods in Alaska in 1867 (p. 10), but a few pages later has Nadia use this simile: "he flung me to the ground as if I were a discarded apple core."

Alaska is in its own way as skewed a picture of this state as Joe McGinnis' *Going to Extremes* — another highly colored, unnatural portrait; a sensational rip-off.

By ANN CHANDONNET