

# OFF RADAR: ‘North by Northeast 2’

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By Dana Wilde

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“North by Northeast 2: New Short Fiction by Maine Writers” follows Littoral Books’ 2019 anthology of the same title and includes stories by some of the same writers, as well as new contributors.

Most of the book’s 16 stories are set in Maine, and most, but not all, of the stories take a conventional realistic approach to their material. Jodi Paloni follows her elder couple Vera and Axel, from volume 1, toward the end of their lives in “An End to It.” In Robert Diamante’s “Never Buy a Used Cat,” a homeless man living secretly in a Portland basement becomes a weirdly plausible, nerve-wracking oracle for a gay apartment dweller.

One of the collection’s most affecting pieces is Linda Buckmaster’s “Short Shorts,” an assemblage of nine, one-to-two page narratives, each telling a different woman’s painful or poignant story, in Maine and elsewhere. Annie Seikonia’s “Love in the Time of Covid-19,” through a sort of dialogue of journal-like entries, portrays a nascent love affair during the early months of the pandemic in Portland (“Whoever thought this little dilapidated Maine city on the coast would become rebranded as a worldwide destination?”). Among other contributors are novelist Eleanor Morse (“Come Hell or High Water”), Reza Jalali (“The Shah of America”), Joshua Rich (“A Good Home Invasion,” in which a sardonic social worker visits an uncooperative old woman), and Anne Elliott, whose strikingly moody story “The Anatolian Girl” depicts a tourist couple in Istanbul purchasing a rug whose interwoven picture story interweaves creepily with the story of a café waitress.

The collection’s most skillfully written piece, for my money, is Rita Doucette’s “Why We Burn Our Fields,” which deftly unearths through magical realism the inscrutable psychological entanglements known in Maine’s backwoods as winter. Or as the narrator of the story calls it, “the plague,” which the people, especially the women, have multiple strange methods for enduring. This includes a community ritual of burning the fields in early spring to purge the plague, never quite successfully. If Gabriel Garcia Marquez had lived in rural Maine instead of Colombia, his stories might have looked like this.



**“North by Northeast 2: New Short Fiction by Maine Writers,”** Agnes Bushell, editor; Littoral Books, Portland, Maine, 2021; 220 pages, paperback, \$22.

There's not space here to mention every story, but overall, novelist Agnes Bushell has given us in "North by Northeast 2" another good selection from Maine's fiction writing community, and beyond. Both "North by Northeast" volumes are available from local and online book sellers.

Off Radar takes note of poetry and books with Maine connections the first and third Fridays of each month. Dana Wilde is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His new book "Winter: Notes and Numina from the Maine Woods" is available for pre-order from North Country Press.

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