

~Smirk~

By Carol Nelson Falcone



Carol Nelson Falcone

Jack Frost Finally Strikes

At Christmas my children received these great new sleds from their grandparents to go sledding in their backyard on one of the best sledding hills around. They were pretty bummed when there wasn't any snow that day to try out these latest Plexiglas sliding devices culled from parents' nightmares. "When's it gonna snow, Mom????!!!" they'd yell in frustration. Which basically led into a discussion about how I'm neither a groundhog nor a weatherman and cannot predict weather; about the teacher saying global warming is to blame; and finally some boundless theories regarding Jack Frost being asleep somewhere in Fairyland and forgetting to bring Winter this year. Maybe he had one too many of those nectar drinks Tinkerbell serves up now and then for her inner circle? Who knows for sure? I promised them that by the time the new year came and my son's birthday arrived mid-January there surely would be snow.

Like Joan of Arc, I was burned at the stake by both of my little darlings when my son's birthday came and went and STILL there was no snow to try out those new sleds upon. "But, MOOOOOOOOOOMMMM," he angrily cried. "You SAID that it would snow by my birthday!" They then teared up looking at their sleds, snow pants, and snow boots each day it didn't snow, thinking their mother was a stinkin' liar and Jack Frost was surely dead somewhere in a gutter.

Nature's Bounty

By JJ Murphy

Upgrading My Winter Hiking Gear



JJ Murphy

I've spent the last week or so cleaning out my gear closet. I don't need a dozen backpacks, several hammocks, or the gaiters that did not fit well. So I sold them and used some of those proceeds to purchase items that I really need.

After last winter, and given the October snowstorm, I'm surprised at how mild winter has been so far. Still, anything can happen; winter is far from over. So my gear purchases were made with harsh winter conditions in mind.

First, I purchased Katoola Microspikes. They're like putting chains and studs on my hiking boots. Now I can walk on ice without slipping and sliding. Last winter's repeated snow/sleet/rain cycle created a landscape that looked like melted ice cream with a brittle covering. Microspikes will put me on almost equal footing with the squirrels, canids and felines who can dig in when the trail is slippery.

On undisturbed areas off-trail, the thin glacée shell is likely to cave in to the freeze dried texture of the snow underneath, even under the weight of squirrels.

I myself was loving the fact that I didn't have to shovel out the driveway, put salt out, drive 5 mph to work for fear of being killed, or step in a patch of melty snow someone tracked while wearing my dry warm socks. This mild winter was going pretty well even if I knew that it eventually was gonna snow; and I was prepared. I had already stocked up on a dozen winter hats for my son, hoping they would last about two weeks before he lost them all. I got the salt out and the shovels ready. This year I even got kid-sized shovels and planned on instituting a new household law that goes along the lines of, "Shovel the walk or go live with grandpa ... and he'll REALLY put you to work."

But then it happened — a Snow Day on a Saturday when I didn't have any work or errands to run and all the chores were complete. And oh, what a perfect Saturday snow day it was! The kids were happy playing in the snow, the laundry was all done, the house clean, food was stocked up in the kitchen, a stack of movies were rented for the weekend. Oh yeah... Momma even had a day to kick back in her PJs and veg to a chick flick and a pile of junk food. How rare is that? It was so eerily perfect I almost questioned whether I was in an alternate universe somehow. The last time I had a moment's peace I was pregnant with the kids. Since then, it's been a roller coaster of parenting hell with minor lulls of "Awww, aren't they cute" to make me keep from killing them.

The cake topper was that the kids shoveled the walk AND the driveway and did so HAPPILY. Not to mention the fact that they looked adorable in the snow, sledding on their new sleds with pink cheeks and runny noses. So I got on my boots and joined them in some snowball fighting, sledding, and snow angel making. Being all rejuvenated from my chick flicks, my newly polished toe nails and a facial, and the kids all happily tired out from a rambunctious day playing in the snow, we settled in with warm cups of hot cocoa and happy souls.

Hmm... Maybe winter isn't all bad after all. It has its moments.

Gaiters keep moisture from getting inside my shoes. Turtle-skin gaiters are meant for summer hiking in swampy environments. Snakes can literally not bite through the fabric of these. Light-weight four-season gear is worth the investment.

My ideal backpacking set-up consists of lightweight well-designed and American-made items.

I've been able to sell off much of the gear that I no longer use because there's a huge market for vintage backpacks made in the US. Those items tend to be heavier, but they last forever.

I've been looking for another pack like my vintage Lowe Alpine, made in the early 1980's. The suspension system is perfect for me and it was made in the USA. So far, as people get larger every pack I have tried on is simply too big. I just had my trusty JanSport day pack repaired. The tag reads "JanSport USA." I notice "USA" is no longer part of JanSport tags on packs currently available for sale, even the ones that look like mine.

I cannot blame the workers in other countries for poor quality outdoor gear. Most Americans buy new stuff every couple of years. I tend to find something that works and keep it for as long as possible. That way, I don't have to take jobs I don't like just to have the money to buy something I don't really need.

Spending time outdoors in any weather is much easier with reliable equipment. Winter has its special challenges. The more time I spend away from a home base, the more I realize that shelter is the first consideration in any survival situation. As 2012 begins, I'm looking at shelter as a critical national issue. I'll find out just how well I have prepared as winter continues.

JJ Murphy is a freelance nature writer, photographer, forager and mycologist giving nature a voice at www.WriterByNature.com.



Claire Ernsberger

About Books

By Claire Ernsberger, Ph.D.

Defending Jacob by William Landay (Delacorte). This sensational legal thriller is also a novel of family life, especially parenting. The premise can seem merely clever in the summing up — the suspect in the murder of a young teenager turns out to be the young son of the prosecutor who is

the central character and narrator of this novel. Books of that kind are often enjoyable — but this one is not only first-class in that strictly plot-smart way, with twists you won't see coming all the way to the end, it's also deeply thoughtful about its characters and their emotional lives. The personality of the narrator is attractive and likable — he's such fun to listen to, in fact, that the powerfully moving dilemmas challenging this loving family sneak up on you. There is never that bass note of foreboding to put you on guard or wear you down before you find yourself emotionally hooked. This novel can't avoid being compared to Scott Turow's contemporary classic *Presumed Innocent*. Landay's novel not only stands up to the comparison, it might actually be better — more involving, satisfying on a deeper level, even than that one.

The Winter Palace by Eva Stachniak (Bantam). A historical novel, rather than a strictly nonfiction biography, of the 18th-century czarina Catherine the Great, and a wonderfully engrossing and moving novel. It's gracefully told with feeling by a servant in constant contact with Catherine; we come to know both of them intimately, and leave this story regretfully. We'll miss this palace and these women — and their families (but a sequel is promised, hurrah!).

An Available Man by Hilma Wolitzer (Ballantine). Wolitzer is so polished, so sophisticated a literary writer, that you may be well into this new novel before it occurs to you that what you're enjoying so much about it is at least partly that it's a terrific romantic comedy. And don't wait for the movie — Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan won't be old enough to play it for a few years.

Rizzo's Fire by Lou Manfredo (St. Martin's Minotaur). Set in different New York neighborhoods (in Brooklyn, mostly) from Wolitzer's novel, and making no bones about what sort of book it is, Manfredo's second Rizzo crime novel is as sophisticated about its little world as the author of *An Available Man* is about hers. You don't have to love this city to love these books, certainly; but it doesn't exactly hurt, either.

The Peach Keeper by Sarah Addison Allen (Bantam). Another perfectly delightful — really, *entrancing* is not overstating the case — southern small-town romance with lightly applied, original and surprising supernatural touches by this reliable entertainer. This is the paperback reprint of last year's bestseller.

The Look of Love by Mary Jane Clark (Morrow). Clark sends the heroine of her "Wedding Cake Mystery" series on the road — to a fancy spa in Los Angeles. An excellent setting for a genuinely thrilling thriller, one that also provides attractive targets for Clark's smart, understated comedy.

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006

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American Life in Poetry

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Anne Coray is an Alaskan, and in this beautiful meditation on the stillness of nature she shows us how closely she's studied something that others might simply step over.

The Art of Being

The fern in the rain breathes the silver message.
Stay, lie low. Play your dark reeds
and relearn the beauty of absorption.
There is nothing beyond the rotten log
covered with leaves and needles.
Forget the light emerging with its golden wick.
Raise your face to the water-laden frond.
A thousand blossoms will fall into your arms.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2004 by Cathy Smith Bowers, whose most recent book of poetry is *The Candle I Hold Up to See You*, Iris Press, 2009. Poem reprinted from *A Book of Minutes*, Iris Press, 2004, by permission of Cathy Smith Bowers and the publisher. Introduction copyright © 2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.



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