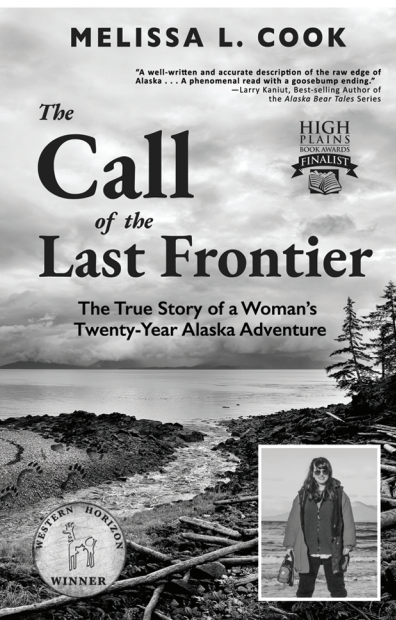


# Cook shares Alaskan adventure in memoir

## Author and retired longtime Thorne Bay teacher gives book talk at library



By DANELLE KELLY  
Daily News Staff Writer

Melissa Cook, author of the award-winning memoir "The Call of the Last Frontier: The True Story of a Woman's Twenty-Year Alaska Adventure" gave a presentation about her book on Tuesday at the Ketchikan Public Library, speaking about her process of writing and her adventures as a teacher in the Aleutian Islands, Craig and Thorne Bay.

Her book won the Wyoming Arts Council's Western Horizon award and was a finalist for the Billings Public Library Board's High Plains book award. Her book also was the number-one best-seller on Amazon for eight months in the Alaska category, she said.

She joked during her presentation that her book actually is a romance novel — a romance novel about her experience of falling in love with Alaska.

Cook and her husband Elgin Cook moved to Nelson Lagoon with their three young sons when they accepted teaching positions there in 1995. They lived there for two years before accepting teaching positions in Craig, where they worked for one year. Following a one-year stint working in

Ohio as technologists training Alaska teachers in Ohio classrooms, they then moved to Thorne Bay to accept teaching positions, and they resided there for 17 years.

Melissa Cook said she grew up in Detroit and Tucson, Arizona, before marrying her husband and moving to Burlington, Wyoming.

They now again live in Burlington and run a successful YouTube channel titled "Wyoming Jeepers," which features

**'I came in heels and I left in my hiking shoes.'**  
— Melissa Cook, author

beautifully edited footage of their back-road adventures in the wilderness of northern Wyoming with friends.

"You can't have an adventure here (in Alaska) for 20 years and just go to a recliner," she said, grinning. "It's just not going to happen."

The first half of Melissa Cook's book, she told the audience in the library, focuses on their time living in Nelson Lagoon. She said that Nelson Lagoon, located at the edge of the Bering Sea, had a population of about 30 winter residents when they lived there.

The book offers short, snappily-written chapters with vivid detail about their experiences that will ring true to

See 'Cook-book talk,' page 12

### Cook-book talk

Continued from page 11

many Alaskans. Floatplanes, extreme weather, minimal amenities, run-ins with bears, and poor internet connections are only a few of the challenges that Cook recalls in her stories.

The center of the book includes more than 30 pages of photographs from her family's time living in Alaska, and even includes two photos of the Pavlof volcano when it erupted while they lived in Nelson Lagoon.

"Adventure landed on my doorstep every day," she said, "so I tell people 'I came to Alaska as a teacher and I left an adventurer. I came in heels and I left in my hiking shoes.'"

She then recounted her and her husband's first foray into seeking a teaching position in Alaska.

"There were 1,000 teachers for 50 jobs" at the job fair they attended in Anchorage, she said.

That experience is recounted in the first chapter of her book titled "Meat Market."

"We were just so intent on getting a job that we never even thought about where are you going for that job. What is it going to be like? That didn't even come to mind," she said.

When they finally landed their jobs in Nelson Lagoon, they were awaiting a flight out of Homer where they were grounded for days due to a fierce storm. The pilot that they secured didn't even know where Nelson Lagoon was, and had spent years only flying short jaunts around the Homer area.

That flight was 450 miles long, and she said at first they were amazed by the dramatic scenery.

"It's so beautiful; color everywhere, and as we're flying out, the smiles were painful — you can imagine — we were just so happy thinking, 'Oh yay!'" she recalled.

When they finally neared Nelson Lagoon, they saw the reality of how different the Aleutian village really was. There were about 30 miles of roads, few colors and plentiful marshes on the nearly featureless land.

"I had no idea what we were getting into," she said she realized.

After they landed, Cook said she didn't even want to get out of the plane.

She and her family finally settled in, and she told the audience about one of their big projects they launched, to improve the burgeoning internet service in the town. They wired several buildings, brought in laptops and trained fellow teachers in technology. Residents then were able to use video calls to connect with the outside and to shop online.

The chapters in Cook's book offer intriguing clues about the stories that she recounts in the book: "Never Mail Yourself a Gun," "Smoke Rises from the Bering Sea," "Seal Throat Stew," "No Coffin Sniffing," "Children of the Tongass Rainforest," and "Don't Squish the Bread."

An unexpected challenge that Cook said she was faced with in her first year in Nelson Lagoon was that she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

"To have MS in rural Alaska is really tough," she said, with the difficulties in accessing hospitals in larger cities.

In 2011, she said she had to take a break from her career due to her illness. In a chapter of her book titled "Friends in Rainy Places," she wrote, "My love for Alaska didn't start until I left my career for medical disability. With the freedom to do whatever I wanted for the first time in my adult life, I took advantage of the opportunity to hike in the forest, wander the beach, stroll the docks, and strengthen friendships that, until now, had been challenging to nurture with my busy work schedule."

Cook told her listeners in the library that she



Melissa Cook

was prescribed a medication in 2013 that nearly completely put her symptoms into remission. She'd experienced numbness in her limbs, extreme fatigue, vertigo, speech difficulties, and even lost her eyesight for a time.

Cook started a blog to help others with MS online at mssymptoms.me, and she said she shares her story to inspire others to keep seeking solutions that really work. She also talks with MS patients to help them to work through their illness.

She added that she also has been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, Hashimoto's disease, latent autoimmune diabetes and fibromyalgia, and she has been fortunate that all are under control with the one medicine. Her experience has led her to offering hope to other people who have similar health conditions.

Following their two-year stint in Nelson Lagoon, Cook's family lived and taught in Craig for one year before accepting jobs in Ohio, feeling sure that their time in Alaska was finished. In less than one year, they were back, after accepting jobs in Thorne Bay.

Cook said, "I wrote this book because when we got to Alaska and we landed in Nelson Lagoon ... it didn't take but looking out of the window of the plane to know that this was something different and I started taking notes."

She added, "I knew that I wanted to write a book when I got to Alaska."

She was able to write such an in-depth and vivid memoir, she said, because of her 20 years of diligent, detailed notes on little sticky note papers. She also leaned on years of emails and newsletters she'd written.

To prepare to begin writing her book, Cook said she placed posters around her work room and affixed her sticky notes under different topics to help her organize her vast collection of memories.

She had several categories, she said, including bears, planes and ferries, and decided she'd write a short story about each of the topics.

"It wasn't long before I realized that wasn't going to work, because I had too many short stories in each chapter," she said.

She then put the book project aside for a couple of years while she and her husband dealt with the deaths of their parents and they built a new house. Right before the COVID-19 pandemic began, she sat down and re-started writing.

"Instead of short stories, I wrote a memoir," she said.

Cook also said that she was inspired to jump back into the book project when several television shows featuring Alaska began airing.

She also was writing a blog called "Alaska Bush Life" at [www.melissacook.us/alaskabushlife](http://www.melissacook.us/alaskabushlife), where she posted the stories that she wasn't able to fit into the book. She also shared her stories and photos on Facebook pages and on her website at [melissacook.us](http://melissacook.us).

Cook then moved on to describing her family's life in Thorne Bay.

"This was a step up from 30 people out in the Aleutians," she said. "It was a logging community at the time that we got there — shot-rock roads, logging trucks, loggers."

An excerpt from her book reads, "We would witness Thorne Bay change from an old logging camp to a poverty-stricken town over the years. Businesses closed, including the only restaurant. The community and island grew cluttered with abandoned, rusty vehicles. Trash of various types piled up everywhere. The city generator caused daily electrical brown and blackouts putting electrical appliances and computers at risk of damage. Dogs had the run of the town, and at night they competed with black bears over trash cans."

She noted in the next paragraph that, "In time, Thorne Bay somewhat rebounded."

The town's roads were paved, sidewalks were built, the state rebuilt the road to Klawock, and a new grocery store was built.

Referring to the Thorne Bay locals, Cook wrote, "The land or maybe the laid-back culture seemed to call the dreamers, fortune and adventure seekers, people hiding with skeletons in their closets, and those hoping for a second chance."

She added, "We were all in it together. It didn't matter where you came from or who you were; when you needed a neighbor, they were often there for you."

She told audience members during her library talk that she also included quite a bit of historical information about that area in her book, including information about World War II-era projects and the Gildersleeve logging camp.

When they finally moved from Thorne Bay in 2016, Cook said she wrote her final chapter on the ferry out, titled, "Goodbye Alaska."