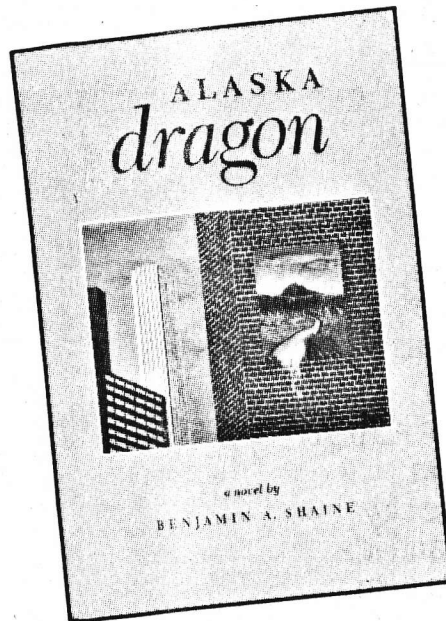


In both place and people, novel is genuine Alaska book



■ **TITLE:** "Alaska Dragon"

■ **AUTHOR:** Benjamin A. Shaine

■ **PUBLISHER:** Fireweed Press

■ **VITAL STATS:** 365 pages, \$10.95

By **MATT CALLAHAN**

Special to the Daily News

One part McCarthy, one part Wiseman and many parts imagination, the mythical ghost town of Darwin, Alaska, is the setting for Benjamin Shaine's creative new novel, "Alaska Dragon." Darwin lies in the middle of Dagheeloyee National Park, just south of the Arctic Circle, and is the nearest human settlement to the ruins of a once thriving copper mining operation from the '20s and '30s. When a determined group of developers announces plans to reopen the old "Syndicate Town" for operation, Darwin's handful of residents face the greatest challenge yet to their quiet way of life. And the external conflict in the book takes off.

If you're worried about the story degenerating into a tired struggle between those who love green and those who love greenbacks, don't be. Shaine has a lot more going on beneath his plot's surface, and much of it centers on the meaning of wilderness and the

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relationships of his characters within it.

Ostensibly a collection of diary entries, letters, memos, journal notes and a few "recollections" from the chief narrator, Jot Schechter, "Alaska Dragon" is well stocked with the sort of characters Alaska is famous for.

Jot, a lanky professor of environmental law, sees his mission as the protection of all wilderness within the park. Jot's vivid journal entries make use of his keen scientific eye.

The second major character is Terri Charles, a recent widow and owner of the lodge in Darwin. She is the backbone of Darwin. Terri's letters to her sister reveal a woman of great strength and, at times, great pain.

Finally, there is Father Mike, a Catholic monk on a journey to find himself in the midst of solitude. His lengthy descriptions of the

surroundings often provide the most troubled, yet most eloquent, passages in the book, as illustrated by this section on winter: *"Darwin feels empty and open, as if it is about to welcome a longed for guest. It feels like the clutter of summer has been put aside, the floor swept and the table is set, and the hosts wait expectant."*

Darwin is also home to a couple of bona fide crazies, an old-timer from the early mining days, and several would-be developers, all of whom come to life under Shaine's skillful pen. Yes, there is a dragon, but its character can be discovered only by reading the book itself.

In the end, the many voices of the novel come together to make "Alaska Dragon" an impressive accomplishment.

□ **Matt Callahan is an MFA candidate in the creative writing program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.**