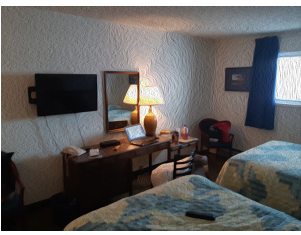




I'm a nudge below the Arctic Circle, staying at the Eagle Plains Hotel, a truck stop on the legendary Dempster Highway. It's February, and although it's still cold out, the returning daylight helps temper the bitterness. Unlike Dawson City, where we lie in a geographical trough that can shutter the light, Eagle Plains sits high, with a far-reaching vista of the tundra and surrounding mountains, and when the sun comes out, it's all bright, blue sky.

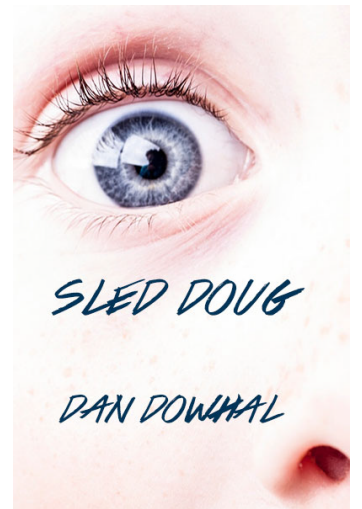


This is an opportunity for me to make some serious progress on my book, *Sled Doug*, so I sit in my unassuming hotel room and crank out the words, writing two, sometimes three shifts a day. I have set up at the tiny desk the room offers, which has a mirror behind it, so that every time I pause to ponder a plot point or choice of words and look up, my reflection is staring back at me, like some disapproving projection of my conscience.

At night I emerge to drink and have supper in the lounge, among stuffed wildlife, and a shrine to the execution of Albert Johnson, the Mad Trapper, which took place not far from here. The Leafs are on TV, and through my partisanship I bond with some of the local staff, who are fellow fans. They live and work here. I ponder this place they call home.

One noon hour, taking a break from the writing, I make a drive up to the rest stop where I can officially claim to have been to the Arctic Circle, Latitude 66° 33' North. There is so much open space I almost feel like I'm not here. There's not another soul in sight for as far as I can see in all 360 degrees. Part of the highway doubles as an occasional airstrip, and there are sections where rows of poles are planted at the side of the road to mark the way when the snowdrifts obscure the highway.

On my journey back, although relieved to have had an uneventful drive, a part of me, now full of northern bravado, almost wishes I had seen the worst the region has to offer. Almost.



Dan Dowhal, February, 2019