Gregory Phipps,

Year of the Puffin.

Gregory Phipps’ Year of the Puffin (Atmosphere Press, 2023) is a truly suspenseful

novel of an American college football team based in Reykjavik at the University of

Iceland. Although this scenario seems unlikely it is not impossible; there was a large

US NATO base in Iceland for fifty years and there have actually been Icelandic

American Football teams in existence, the Reykjavik Einherjar and the Grindavik

Berserkir, which also sometimes played teams from Europe. The Puffins are in a

Division II conference based on the east coast of America, and a successful start to

their season and the possibility of winning a championship raises their profile and

attracts a famous TV network to the possibility filming a special report on them,

hence the novel’s title. So, no pressure then? Phipps tracks the team’s course through

the season mainly through the eyes, thoughts and experiences of four main

characters, the university’s sports director, the team coach (a woman) and the two

quarterbacks vying for being the starter each game. They all have secrets, sexual,

emotional, moral or financial, that could potentially derail the program and its

possible success. Their personal struggles with their sense of worth and identity,

especially in terms of future careers, family relations, spouses, and lovers, imagined

or real, past, present and, perhaps, to be, are well-plotted and engaging and both

directly and indirectly affect how the season progresses. The football action itself,

which is both well-written and convincing, either helps or exacerbates their

individual problems and fears. Indeed, the personal and football plots are so well

intertwined that the resolution of both the team’s season and of the individuals’ fates

become tense, engrossing, and page-turning. The reader really does want to know

how it all ends—and you can’t ask for anything more in good sport fiction!

Footnote: As an ‘útlendingur’ who has lived in Iceland for almost fifty years, I often

laughed out loud at Phipps’ droll and laconic, but somehow always affectionate

comments on Icelandic society, way of life, and weather; sadly, some of this

perceptive humor may be lost on those who have never visited this slightly weird

but wonderful country.

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