

Book Review: The Prospectors  
By Ariel Djanikian

I'm sure you're all at least somewhat familiar with the California Gold Rush; that frenzied time period in the mid-1800s when approximately 300,000 people descended on an area near Coloma with dreams of striking it rich. The influx of people from across the U.S. and abroad led to California's rapid ascension to statehood.

But are you aware of the great Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1800s? If so, more power to you. I was not (or at least not that I recall learning about in school), but Ariel Djanikian brings that period in history to life in "The Prospectors," a novel based on the people and events that drove thousands to the frozen north in search of wealth.

The story focuses on the multigenerational lives of three families: the Berrys, the Bushes, and the Lowells, the latter of whom were First Nations people who saw the land they inhabited literally dug out from under them by swarms of prospectors.

In 1897, Ethel Berry – the oldest of the four Bush sisters, a family of struggling California fruit farmers – accompanies her husband Clarence Berry to the Yukon in northern Canada where, after numerous setbacks, they strike a huge vein of gold. Make that several veins of gold. They write of their life-altering discovery to their respective families in Selma, California, and indeed, the proverbial rags-to-riches scenario unfolds.

But money changes people. Alice Bush, the middle of the four Bush sisters, has always seen herself as inferior and destitute. But when she accompanies her sister and brother-in-law on their return trip to the Yukon, she discovers a newfound ambition – no doubt fueled by the combination of money and power. She works her way into Clarence's good graces as a confidant and advisor, often keeping her sister – Clarence's wife Ethel –

in the dark over business dealings as well as family matters. These business dealings soon expand beyond the frozen tundra to the thriving oil fields of California. But the family secrets, too, are ready to explode, negatively impacting lives and relationships.

Juxtaposed against this nucleus of the story is a flash-forward more than 100 years to California in 2015, where Anna, Alice's great-great-granddaughter, is asked to fulfill a request from her dying grandfather to make financial restitution to descendants of the Lowell family whose ancestors paid a steep price for the wealth the Berry and Bush families accumulated. The moral and ethical conflicts abound.

Throughout the story, the bulk of which takes place in the Yukon, Djanikian paints a vivid picture of the vast frozen wilderness and harsh climate, including the weeks-long journey by steamer ship and miles of hiking over frozen ground to illustrate the lengths people will go in the hopes of making a life-altering discovery.

But she also details the family loyalties, jealousies, hostilities and violence that are inevitable where wealth and power are concerned. And to what extent people will go, and the price they will pay, to not just accumulate, but to protect that wealth.

My only complaint – and okay, I'm nitpicking here – is that Djanikian ends both timeframes of the family saga a bit abruptly. There are a few loose ends from the turn-of-the-century portion of the story that are smoothly tied up in the present day. But as the core story wraps in 1905 Los Angeles, the reveals that occur and animosity that erupts between Bush and Berry family members left me a bit unsatisfied as to what unfolded in these family's lives over the coming century.

Maybe that's where Djanikian has planted the seeds for a sequel. Who knows?

That criticism aside, “The Prospectors” is a well-written historical novel whose story will hold as well as educate you. The Bushes and Berrys were real families, and the memoir written by Alice Bush is referenced by Djanikian in the book’s Acknowledgments section. That, too, would likely make for interesting reading.

I give “The Prospectors” 4 out of 5 stars. Whether you’re a fan of history or not, I think you will enjoy the read. And as always, I welcome your feedback.