

The Struggle by Dale Nelson

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Noyo Crab Gear/photo by Dale Nelson

The satisfaction of affluence: the taste for fresh crab in distant urban markets, drives the pursuit of affluence in Noyo Harbor, a fishing village on California's rugged coast. Fishermen use wire-mesh pots, fastened by nylon lines to bright-painted buoys, baited with fish heads and entrails, to lure ravenous Dungeness crabs out of rocky lairs. Crabbers rise early and set out across bright dark December water to bring in the daily catch. Boats have been lost in heavy weather, often because they have been overloaded when a captain, lucky, tried to stow a few too many crabs; make a little more money. The risk is inherent to the trade, grudgingly accepted by those who engage in it, but of little meaning at the warm, dry restaurants and dining room tables where the crabs are eagerly consumed.

Fortunes have been made: lucky fishermen, shrewd marketers, brilliant chefs, have all used wild crab extracted from cold and rocky waters to promote themselves, seeking the affluence promised to all but available only to a few. The struggle is relentless. The crabs are struggling to survive; the fishermen, setting out at dawn, are caught in the tension between the demands of the market and the demands of the sea. The consumers never get enough; the truck drivers and dishwashers, waitresses and sommeliers avidly vie for work, struggling to break out, seeking affluence.

It all comes down to the pots, ligan washed in salt and wrack, buoys riding the groundswell, tilting in the chop. The crabs fight to get in the pots, and continue to fight over the bait once they are in. The fishermen fight to get them home. All of them want what they deserve.

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