

Arctic Discourses

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ARCTIC DISCOURSES. Edited by Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski, and Henning Howlid Wærp. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 341 pp., index. \$67.99 (hardback). ISBN 9781443819596.

This wide-ranging work of literary criticism traces how the Arctic is imagined and reimagined in literature and music, and how these representations confirm or counter prevailing images of identity, environment, and arctic peoples.

A relatively recent expansion of literary studies to arctic subjects is yielding a growing body of work—much of it by scholars represented in ARCTIC DISCOURSES. Most of these studies have focused on discourses within single nations or cultures, particularly Britain and North America. ARCTIC DISCOURSES, in contrast, is notable for its geographic and cultural sweep. The subjects of the chapters sprawl across the entire circumpolar world and a good portion of Europe and North America, and over less dramatically broad but still varied theoretical territory. Most of the accounts examined in the book are rooted firmly in Western culture, though the last chapter addresses the poetry of Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. The book is also notable for its treatment of more recent materials, from French novels and Viennese newspapers of the mid-19th century to genre fiction and operas from the last decade.

Their shared leadership of the literary studies research program Arktiske diskurser (Arctic Discourses), based at the University of Tromsø with collaborators in several European countries and Canada, places the editors in a good position to cover diverse aspects of the subject. The 15 chapters are loosely

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divided into two sections. Part I: Discovering the Arctic examines nonfiction materials such as expedition reports, travel writing, political texts, diaries, and satirical journalism. Part II: Imagining and Reimagining the Arctic takes up fictional treatments, including several flavors of novels and genre fiction, musical works, poetry, and (interestingly) foreign policy documents and speeches.

The notion of discourses pivots on the idea that literary works, fictional or factual, are actively created by people in particular contexts—and are therefore cultural practices. What is said includes not only explicit statements, but what is assumed, left unsaid, and denied. The 15 chapters in *ARCTIC DISCOURSES* use this framework to draw out perspectives and agendas on identity, power, race, gender, utopia and dystopia, nature and culture, colonialism, and nationalism. Several chapters explore the strategies used to fashion the identity of explorers (often as white, male, solitary heroes); portray northern landscapes (often as feminine, empty, and waiting for exploration); and represent indigenous peoples of the Arctic, notably the Inuit and Sámi, who were often contrasted to Western norms. These strategies were often bundled together: more than one expedition account discussed in early chapters of *ARCTIC DISCOURSES* waxes rhapsodic about “new,” “virgin,” or “untrodden” territory mere paragraphs after recording ample evidence of Inuit settlement.

While each contribution contains useful insights, a few stand out for their nuanced and compelling treatments. Kirsten Thisted’s essay on Knut Rasmussen’s account of the Fifth Thule Expedition shows how he negotiated his cultural identity from a liminal position as both Dane and Greenlander; and contemplates what impact that story has had on Inuit identity and politics. Sherrill Grace sees an alternative discourse about the Canadian North developing in artistic negotiations over music. In these recent portrayals, the Arctic may remain “alluring, and even deadly,” but is never empty or waiting; it is “above all a *home* to people who live there.”

Other chapters bring forward unusual sources that are interesting both in and of themselves and for the way they cast new light on the Arctic represented in (perhaps more familiar) Western European and North American texts. In back-to-back chapters, Susi K. Frank and Tim Youngs examine Soviet depictions of Arctic expeditions in the 1930s, contrasting their motifs of heroes and the environment with stock portrayals of their Western counterparts. Harald Gaski’s essay about Sámi poet, artist, and musician Nils-Aslak Valkeapää unfolds a poem about a reindeer herd traveling across the landscape, which calls not only on language but on typography and sound to evoke motion and a way of life.

Readers without some previous knowledge of literary criticism may find some of the specialist language difficult. Discipline-specific terms such as the Other, the male gaze, imagining, and topoi are often defined and discussed within the book but not necessarily at the reader’s first brush with them. A good reference source like *CRITICAL TERMS FOR LITERARY STUDY* (for the overprepared) or Wikipedia (with its surprisingly good coverage of literary criticism) should be kept to hand.

ARCTIC DISCOURSES is recommended—even required—for those studying polar literature and for libraries with collections in northern studies. For fans of explorers’ accounts and other forms of arctic literature, the book offers new perspectives on familiar stories. Perhaps above all, this work is a salutary reminder that when we write we tell a story, whether or not we mean to; and that we are revealed alongside our subject matter.

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