

IMAGINING THE SUPERNATURAL NORTH. Edited by ELEANOR ROSAMUND BARRACLOUGH, DANIELLE MARIE CUDMORE and STEFAN DONECKER. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-77212-267-1. xxiii + 328 p., b&w illus., 16 contributors, index. Softbound. US\$ and Cdn\$29.95. Also available in epub, mobile, and PDF formats.

Once upon a time, no other point of the compass inspired such fear among the inhabitants of the temperate regions as the North...not even the South, despite its plethora of diseases. Maybe this fear was a genetic reminder of travails suffered during the last Ice Age. Or perhaps it came from the fact that the North's geography commonly wreaked havoc on the machinations of humankind. Whatever the reason, our imaginations took that fear and ran amok with it. The result? Monsters, terrifying wildlife, instant hypothermia, and much more.

*Imagining the Supernatural North* consists of 17 essays about, more or less, the subject of its title. There's an essay on Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* and an essay on Austrian travel writer Ida Pfeiffer's 19th century visit to Iceland; there's an essay on black metal music (because it's influenced by Norse sagas) and one on the Greek myth of Hyperborea; there's an essay on Vladimir Nabokov's imaginary northern kingdom of Zembla in *Pale Fire* and one on the attempts by Victorian mesmerists to locate Sir John Franklin. This range of subjects gives the book a remarkable diversity. In fact, the subjects are so diverse that several of them fall outside the latitudinal range of the North. In the essay entitled "In Jewish Lore, Not Only Evil Descends from the North," the author notes that sacrifices traditionally took place at the northern side of the altar (p. 8), while circumcisions were performed in the northern part of a synagogue (p. 15); and the essay on the Internet-mediated subculture called Otherkin ("The Influence of Northern Mythology and Fauna on Contemporary Spiritual Subcultures") discusses how many Otherkins—regardless of where they live—designate Arctic critters such as polar bears and walrus as their "other kin."

In reading the book, I often got the impression that its authors had never traveled farther north than the northernmost parts of their university campuses.

Likewise, many of the essays read as though they were written by graduate students eager to impress their professors. Those essays are so suffused with citations that there's very little room left for original theorizing. What's more, errors abound. Contrary to what Silvije Habulinec writes in "The Dissemination of Greenlandic Legends and Myths in the Writings of Hinrich Rink and Knud Rasmussen" (p. 200), Rasmussen did collect myths in East Greenland: he went to Angmagssalik in 1919 to do so. In the same essay, *qivittut* are described as "mundane beings" (p. 195), but I've collected stories where they fly into a village, grab a small child, and proceed to eat it—not a very mundane thing to do! Also, they're not simply inland dwellers, as the author states (p. 195), but often live in the

mountains near villages. And Brian Walter, in "Nabokov's Zembla and Aesthetic Bliss," seems unaware that the Siberian islands of Novaya Zemlya are usually called "Nova Zembla" only by the Dutch (he also calls those islands "historical" rather than "geographical") (p. 209).

And yet *Imagining the Supernatural North* is not without merit. Jennifer Michaels' "Ida Pfeiffer's Visit to Iceland" fills in a blank space with respect not only to 19th century travelers to Iceland, but also to early women travelers. Ms. Pfeiffer triumphs over the once popular view that women were "unfit for the rigours of travel" (p. 169), and in her Icelandic wanderings, she "subverts notions of gender by showing that women could effectively pursue... 'masculine' activities" (p. 181). Speaking of Iceland, there's also Stefan Donecker's "The Supernatural Image of Iceland in Johannes Kepler's *Somnium*." The Kepler work in question, praised by Isaac Asimov as "the first piece of authentic science fiction," is a mix of imaginary journeys to the moon and no less imaginary descriptions of Iceland, a goodly portion of whose inhabitants seem to be witches. These witches, Kepler writes, "learn as much about the universe from their conversations with demons and familiar spirits as astronomers [like Kepler himself] deduce from their scientific observations" (p. 115). I have put *Somnium* on my short list of books to read!

One of the best essays in the collection is Shane McCorristine's "Mesmerism and Victorian Arctic Exploration." The essay's main focus is Emma, the so-called Seeress of Bolton, who in 1849 was asked to discover the fate of Sir John Franklin. After she has a "conversation" with Franklin, Emma reports that not only is he alive, but he plans to return to England in 9 1/2 months. Upon being provided with a map, she points to the west coast of Hudson Bay as Sir John's likely whereabouts. For McCorristine, the Victorians imagined the Arctic "as a realm of spiritualized masculine endeavor," which sets the stage for "an encounter in popular culture in which male bodies and spectral female presences acted together" (p. 162). McCorristine's account of these interactions has much wider implications than whether the spectral presences might have been correct in their guesswork.

A supernatural North may or may not still exist, but the natural North is rapidly disappearing, its sea ice melting, its permafrost thawing, and much of its fauna dwindling, thanks to climate change. That a 1000-passenger luxury cruise ship like the *Crystal Serenity* could travel from Alaska to New York without mishap, as it did in 2016, strikes me as being more frightening than anything our forebears could have imagined about the North...

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