

post office and supply four photographs of themselves, for example, Jones writes only that the process was completed “without a glitch” (58). One suspects the Germans saw things differently.

*City for Empire* makes an important contribution to Alaska historiography. This reviewer has no doubt Jones’s book will be used by many historians for its extraordinary level of detail on the lives of everyday Alaskans in the interwar period. As a whole, however, the book falls well short of its ambitious goals.

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***A Woman in the Polar Night.* By Christiane Ritter. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2010. 215 pp. Maps, photographs.**

In 1933, Christiane Ritter, an Austrian painter, received a letter from her husband, Hermann Ritter, an explorer and researcher who was living in Spitsbergen, an Arctic island north of Norway. He wrote, “Leave everything as it is and follow me to the Arctic” (11). Ritter is at first reluctant because, like most Europeans of her generation, she believed the Arctic to be a frozen, lonely place unfit for human habitation. However, she eventually sets off from Hamburg on a cruise ship that drops her at King’s Bay on Spitsbergen, from where she travels further north with her husband to a small hut on a point called Grey Hook on an uninhabited coastline. *A Woman in the Polar Night* was first published in Germany in 1938 as *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht* and then in England in 1954. Ritter describes the polar night and the polar day in prose that Lawrence Millman, in his 2010 introduction, notes is “so quietly ecstatic and so lyrical that it would make most actual poets green with envy” (5). Ritter is at first appalled at the tiny, primitive shack, and the “ghastly country” with its unrelenting rain and fog, and a landscape of bleak stones surrounded by sea. The book is the story of her gradually awakening appreciation and love of the beauty and peace of the North. Her hope is that others will be inspired by her story and come to understand, as she does, the satisfaction of a life with few material possessions, dictated only by the changing moods of the seasons.

In the beginning, Ritter worries about starvation, scurvy, and lack of “real” food, but soon learns to cook and appreciate the seal and wild birds that her husband Hermann and their companion, Karl, shoot. As their stores of domestic food diminish and they come to depend completely on wild-game, hunting and the search for food become all-consuming interests and Ritter begins to realize how quickly they have developed a harmony and

rhythm with the land that consumes every aspect of their day and night. There are two major time developments in the story: the first is when the sun sets for the last time on October 16, and the second when it rises again 132 days later on February 25. During the time of darkness a great many changes occur. At one point Ritter is left alone for ten days while the men go hunting. She experiences the fury of a winter blizzard that completely buries the hut and she comes to understand the profound and heart wrenching solitude of the North and the overwhelming joy of companionship when the men return. She describes the strange personality changes that affect the three of them during the darkness and how each copes in his or her own idiosyncratic way to the confines of life in the small hut. She focuses on the minutiae of daily life; the vast, mysterious Arctic night; and the storms that keep them inside for days on end. This contrasts sharply with their “permanent state of elevation” when the sun returns and they are again able to spend days outside in the slowly awakening North:

There is movement and life again. A feeling of boundless joy overwhelms all three of us, as though the stream of life were suddenly flowing through us again after a long paralysis. (150-151)

It is impossible to spend time in the Arctic and not be profoundly moved by its raw beauty and power. Ritter’s painter’s eye and her descriptive prose capture the spirit and magnitude of the land. She describes vividly the great, crushing, drifting mass of pack ice; the intoxicating colours and movement of the northern lights; and the ever-present fragile balance between what she calls “perfect beauty” and the stark reality of the “terrors of the polar night” as the North is perceived by most Europeans. When Ritter is offered an opportunity to return home before the year is out she freely admits that she is a victim of what the men call “Spitsbergen mania” and refuses to leave:

We want to go further and further into the Arctic lands, the island in the ice, the frozen earth, which is still lying there as on the day that God created it. Europe, and everything that binds us to Europe, is forgotten. We have a wild longing, more urgent than ever before, and stronger than all reason and all memory. (211)<sup>7</sup>

Ritter’s experience of the transformative effect of the North is common to many men and women who have spent time in all parts of the Arctic. She notes that “a year in the Arctic should be compulsory to everyone” to teach people “what’s important in this life and what isn’t.” Most Europeans and

Canadians will likely never visit their northern regions, but anyone with an interest in the Arctic would do well to read Ritter's account. Although it has been three-quarters of a century since she visited Spitsbergen and wrote her story, many parts of the circumpolar "Arctic wilderness" are much the same today as when she witnessed it. However, in a few years, climate change, melting ice, international shipping lanes, resource exploration and development, increased settlement, and demand for wildlife will transform the Arctic forever. The publication of Ritter's memories is an important contribution to our knowledge of what is still one of the last frontiers of our modern world. Perhaps the lessons that Ritter learned from the untouched Arctic can be imparted to others, and with a knowledge of the North and what is at stake, it is possible that people who care for wild lands will be able to influence the amount and type of development that takes place in this huge but fragile wilderness. Although the Arctic might seem to be, as many early explorers thought, a *terra nullius* or empty land of no importance, it is important to preserve this wilderness, not only for the species that inhabit the Far North but also because it is humbling for men and women to know that there are still places on earth where life is difficult and treacherous, and survival, at times, uncertain.

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***Porcupines and China Dolls*. By Robert Arthur Alexie. Toronto: Stoddart, 2002. 286 pp.**

At a time when many Native survivors of residential schools have finally found a voice and an audience, Robert Alexie's novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, first published in 2002, continues to stand out as one of the most powerful and graphic descriptions of residential school practices and the subsequent destruction that claimed entire Aboriginal communities. Alexie is a member of the Teetl'it Gwich'in Dene of the Northwest Territories. He was born and raised in Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories (NWT) and attended residential school in Inuvik. He became the chief of the Teetl'it Gwich'in in the 1990s and served two terms as vice-president of the Gwich'in Tribal Council. His early life as an adult was not easy because, like many residential school survivors, he had trouble with alcohol, drugs, and anti-social behaviour. Recognizing that he was an alcoholic, he began a rehabilitation program and starting writing a novel. Impressed by the power of the novel, his counsellor sent it to a literary agent. *Porcupines and*