

***From Oral Tradition to Rap: Literatures of the Polar North.* By Karen Langgård & Kirsten Thisted (eds). Nuuk, Illisimatusarfik/Forlaget Atuagkat, 2011. 287 pp.**

The aim of this book, a collection of essays that emerged as the result of a literary project as part of the fourth International Polar Year, is to provide a sorely needed guide to the literary histories of the Arctic. It is in part a reaction to what the editors note as a lack of knowledge about the literature of the region even among students and researchers from within the region itself, with the aim to counteract this by creating a basis for comparison: “a new space where new angles and perspectives might arise” (13). The essays take the reader on a literary journey from the Nordic region to North America and continuing to Siberia. The essays cross ethnic and national boundaries—while maintaining distinctly national sections—in an exploration of oral tradition and literature. In producing a survey of the literary histories of the Arctic, the collection explores what triggers the need for written literature; in what circumstances and forms oral literature is maintained; and the interactions between oral and written traditions.

Two chapters focus on Greenland, divided between oral tradition and written literature, and two chapters are likewise devoted to Canada, divided between literature in English and Inuktitut. The remaining areas covered are afforded one chapter each: Sami literature, Faroese literature, and a chapter each on Alaskan Native writers and Siberian (Koryak) literature. The more successful chapters are without doubt those that offer more than an encyclopedic overview of the literature of the region concerned. Particularly successful are the chapters by Harald Gaski and Malan Marnersdóttir, as well as those by the book’s editors Karen Langgård and Kirsten Thisted. Gaski succeeds in writing an informative essay that details the history of Sami literature without being encyclopedic, providing superb analysis of the literature and insight into the relationship between oral and written literatures. If any flaw is to be found in Gaski’s contribution, it is that for those familiar with his writing, much of what is found here can be sourced elsewhere. Marnersdóttir provides an eloquent introduction to Faroese literature that leads to an engaging description of the relationship between traditional oral poetry and developments in modern music, observing the interdependence or duality of the inseparableness of poetry and performance. Karen Langgård’s essay on “Greenlandic Literature from Colonial Times to Self-Government” and Kirsten Thisted’s essay on “Greenlandic Oral Traditions”—without doubt the two highlights in the collection—justify their length (together covering almost half of the entire collection). Langgård’s essay—angled towards the written—is particularly notable for its detailed

analysis of contemporary writers and treatment of genre development, while Thisted's essay—angled towards the oral—benefits from an accessibility of style and insightful content, clearly guiding the reader through the three sections “collecting, reframing and reinvention.” Thisted's article will also be of interest to scholars of Norse Greenland, with new insight offered into Thisted's previous writing on the subject (78–82).

The remaining essays—several of which are pioneering, providing information about literatures that seldom receive attention—are, while no less interesting, regrettably less successful due to an overwhelmingly encyclopedic and at times turgid style. Michael Kennedy's exemplary bibliography of Canadian Inuit literature in English, while undoubtedly invaluable to the student or researcher of this literature, is intentionally primarily a reference guide; Noel McDermott's offering on Canadian literature in Inuktitut, which provides a good historical background to the language and its development, suffers from its goal being the very comprehensiveness that will appeal to a minority of readers but alienate those for whom this literature remains unavailable through lack of translation. William Schneider offers a similarly comprehensive journey through the history of Alaska Native writers; although excessively dry, it offers interesting insights in the latter half of the essay. Alexander D. King's essay “A Literary History of the Koryak,” is yet another pioneering work that provides invaluable information and a useful overview of the chronological development of Koryak literature.

There can be no doubt that the aim to provide an idea of Arctic literary landscapes has been achieved with every success, having renegotiated centre-periphery constructions “to create a new mental map of the world” (8), but the hope of providing satisfying knowledge falls short in the less analytical essays. It is perhaps the lack of continuity in the style of the essays—varying from highly analytical to predominantly descriptive—that leaves the reader unsure of the purpose of the collection; what one reader skips over will no doubt be the focus of another's reading. All readers will emerge equipped, however, for the comparison that the editors hope the collection will afford. This book, providing the essential information required for students of Arctic literature as well as a useful starting point for specialist researchers, will no doubt remain the leading resource on Arctic literature for a long time to come.

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