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Review: **Elizabeth Leane**, *Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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When Elizabeth Leane writes, in her introduction to *Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South*, that ‘Antarctica is, traditionally, unwritable’ (1), she is at once recognising a prevailing discourse of Antarctic literature and establishing the trend against which she will convincingly argue. Over the course of her study, Leane deftly demonstrates that the ‘unwritable’ trope is simply one of many Antarctic tropes.

Such is the amount of literature with which a study of this kind has to contend, Leane outlines in her introduction that the focus will be primarily on ‘narrative fiction’, ‘structured around six [...] thematic clusters’ (16). Several chapters later, Leane narrows her study again, devoting half of the chapter to one aspect of one polar expedition: Titus Oates’s infamous exit from Captain Scott’s tent. Yet even this moment ‘has produced too many literary and artistic responses to cover comprehensively’ (87). If there is a sense in these remarks that Leane’s ambitious study is dangerously exclusive, it is nevertheless clear that she has read widely and is keen to discuss as many texts as possible, without losing sight of her structure.

Almost no genre goes unrepresented, and there is discussion of gothic fiction, travel narratives, speculative fiction, erotic fiction, ‘chick lit’, and disaster movies; even the children’s movie *Happy Feet* (2006) is mentioned in passing. And though critical theorists are occasionally evoked (including Julia Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, Yi-Fu Tuan), there is no one over-arching theoretical approach here; instead, theories are outlined in order to clarify the characteristics of a particular genre. It is as a detailed study of key themes of Antarctic fiction that this book is best understood, and it benefits from an impressive bibliography.

Leane also makes the important distinction between studies that do not differentiate between

the northern and southern poles and those (including hers) that see Antarctic fiction as a style in its own right – a style rooted in the region’s unfamiliarity, isolation and lack of indigenous culture. Yet, while other studies do exist, Leane deals with such an extensive number of recent texts, including one that was released just seven months before *Antarctica in Fiction*, that it is evident she is discussing a genre that is still developing, thereby demonstrating the need for such an up-to-date study.

Perhaps inevitably, it is in the first two chapters that the sense of familiarity is greatest, with discussions of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*, and Lovecraft’s *Mountains of Madness*. Of such familiar texts, Leane does not say anything new (though she may be the first to call Coleridge’s Antarctica ‘werewolf-like’ (61)) and often speaks through other critics when analysing a text. The presence of Elena Glasberg is strongly felt in this respect in chapter three. But, as a rule, Leane is less concerned with close textual analysis than with tracing the development of Antarctic themes; indeed, the sheer number of texts discussed necessitates short descriptive, rather than analytical, overviews. The concept of a whirlpool portal at the south pole, for example, is detailed with reference to examples from antiquity to modernity, and it is the common features of the portal that are important (though interesting nuances are never simply ignored). Nor is the book entirely without instances of close reading. Extended analyses tend to come at the end of each chapter, exploring in detail, through one representative text, themes discussed in that chapter.

It is when Leane's study moves towards more recent thematic developments that the importance of this work becomes most evident, as many of the texts to which she attends have not yet accumulated a body of critical work. Chapter four is perhaps the study’s strongest; here Leane discusses the literature produced by exploration parties on the continent itself. It is a fascinating look at how the production and consumption of literature functions as a survival technique for Arctic and Antarctic expeditions. This briefly collapses the distinction between the northern and southern poles, though it is clear that the literary crossover between these environments is found not in the literature *about* the poles, but in the literature produced *at* the poles.

The final chapter of the study neatly brings the thematic focus full circle. It deals with the disruption caused by the Antarctic environment to the perception of time and space, recalling the whirlpools and wormholes from chapter one. Consequently, it is a shame not to see Poe once more acknowledged (an author who looms large throughout most of the study). His absence is most keenly felt when Leane discusses the apparent timelessness of Antarctica, and points to the importance of diary-writing; this recalls the final section of Poe's *Pym*, when Pym drifts towards the pole while making sporadic diary entries. It is also slightly confusing when Leane suggests 'The earliest example of cryonics in fiction can be found in an Antarctic-based novel, W. Clark Russell's *The Frozen Pirate*' from 1887 (167). It is unclear why Mary Shelley's 1863 short story, 'Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman' should be ignored. But these are minor complaints, and do not significantly impact the argument.

Leane has written a remarkably diverse and inclusive study of the narrative fiction of the far south, and her enthusiasm for the subject matter is clear in the light-hearted, but illuminating, descriptions of Antarctica in popular culture (the most entertaining of which discusses a "cosmetic collagen alternative" called "Antarctilyne" (153)). As an extended and descriptive bibliography of Antarctic narrative literature, *Antarctica in Fiction* is a valuable guide to the genre's major themes, and given the ongoing interest in the Antarctic itself, Leane's study is well-placed to achieve its own popularity.