Imagining the Supernatural North

Author: Shelly Sommer
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Imagining the Supernatural North. Edited by Elea-
nor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore, 
and Stefan Donecker. Edmonton: Polynya Press (Uni-
versity of Alberta Press), 2016. 328 pp., index. $29.95 

The introduction to Imagining the Supernatural 
North invokes Margaret Atwood’s “True North,” and 
in some ways this book is a long and colorful coda to 
that definitive essay. It explores the notion of the North 
as the realm of the supernatural within the European 
tradition from antiquity to the present day. 

This is a North populated by gods, witches, real and 
imagined invaders, allegorical figures, monsters from the 
margins of maps, spirits, demons, and trolls. It has no 
firm geographical boundaries. In some cases, the con-
cept of the North maps on to current understandings 
of the Arctic. At other times it is instead a cardinal di-
rection, or a relative position. Ideas about supernatural 
aspects of the North diverged widely in the Western tra-
dition, but the North remained the blank space on the 
map, an uncanny, hostile, but alluring place that proved 
a convenient screen for projecting hopes and fears, or 
acting as a foil for European conditions.

Sixteen scholars from twelve countries across Europe, 
North America, and Australia explore particular instanc-
es of the North’s symbolic geography. Chapters proceed 
chronologically from Jewish lore and ancient Greek 
proverbs and myths; through views of monsters, spirits, 
and women in medieval and the early modern period; 
to nineteenth-century travelers’ tales and naturalists’ ac-
counts; to modern reimaginings of Northern motifs in 
science fiction, black metal music, and identity politics. 

Actors in each of these times show their own “im-
aginatio borealis,” an imagined North. The ancient world 
looked North for invaders, gods, or intermediaries be-
tween gods and mortals who were both and neither. 
Medieval cosmology traded in that ancient dichotomy 
for more negative monsters and demons, and looked for 
their qualities in people—especially women. Witches 
and demons disappeared during the Enlightenment, re-
placed by an image of the North as a romantic landscape 
or a fatal beauty to be conquered. In the modern pe-
riod, the idea of the North expresses a longing for the 
paranormal and mysterious, the spiritual, or the uncor-
rupted.

In some ways this book isn’t about the North at all. 
While it turns on that symbolic geography, it roves over 
a variety of European topics in literature, history, and 
anthropology. Chapters review the theological/medi-
cal view of women held by medieval academics; the 
turn of sagas set in Greenland from realistic to fantastic 
landscapes and people; a forlorn dream-story by Joh-
annes Koepler, published posthumously; and the ap-
pearance of Nordic supernatural themes in black metal 
and death metal. Of particular note is the last chapter, 
by Erica Hill, who takes on the implicit assumption 
that shamanism equals religious practice in the North. 
She argues that the Western focus on shamanism con-
 structs a myth of its own, obscuring the beliefs and 
ritual practices of hunters and their wives that were 
the majority of religious activity in the contact-period 
circumpolar North.

If the category of the North as seen in this book 
seems sometimes too à la Lakoff, in the end it shows in 
what a variety of ways we can project otherness on a 
conveniently remote geography. Perhaps consciousness 
of the shadowy and persistent images our culture bears 
of the North can help us see more clearly the rapidly 
changing Arctic that is becoming our reality.

Notes and bibliographies throughout, and a really 
excellent index at the end, round out a good scholarly 
work. It belongs on the shelf of polar collections along-
side Arctic Discourses and other works on construction of 
the North in Western thought. It will also fit well into 
collections on the history of Western science, literature, 
or religion.

Shelly Sommer
Information & Outreach Director 
Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR) 
University of Colorado Boulder 
UCB 450 
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0450, U.S.A.

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