

ECHOING SILENCE: ESSAYS ON ARCTIC NARRATIVE.

Edited by JOHN MOSS. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997.
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One of the great delights of northern scholarship is its diversity. Northern specialists actually speak to each other across disciplinary and cultural boundaries, in ways that are unique to the region. Arctic is an excellent example of this pattern, in that it draws together work by natural scientists and contributions from the humanities and social sciences. This fascinating collection of essays assembled by John Moss similarly illustrates the complexity and richness of northern research, for it draws together work by literary critics and writers, Inuit storytellers, and historians. The book includes carefully footnoted scholarly contributions, theory-laden analyses, reminiscences, and culturally eloquent stories. In 1995, a group of northern commentators ranging from Nellie Cournoyea to Rudy Wiebe, David Woodman, and Aritha van Herk assembled at the University of Ottawa for a Symposium on Arctic Narrative. John Moss has collected a large number of the diverse presentations given at the conference and, in so doing, has provided us with rich insights. As he notes in the preface: “There is much going on in this text: different generations of writers representing diverse aesthetics, different visions, sharing the rhetorical stage; a mixing of academic and non-academic voices; scholarly discourse in a context of enthusiasm and actual experience; intellectual rigour reinforcing and sometimes contradicting expressions of personal conviction; matters of difference addressed, matters of race, of cultural perspective, and especially of gender” (p. 3). The symposium, by all accounts a remarkable intellectual, social, and cultural event, is now available, in part, in textual form. The various contributions—22 papers in all, plus an engaging preface by the editor—offer unique “explorations” of the North. While several of the essays examine aspects of the physical exploration of the region by outsiders, others play with the philosophical and literary meanings of the Arctic. A number of the contributions examine specific texts about the North (including writings by John Steffler, Harold Horwood, Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van

Herk, and John Moss) while several others consider such themes as the role of gender in representations of the North. It is an eclectic mix. Alooook Ipellie remembers John Moss's comment that it is hard to make love on the tundra and observes: "Without pretending macho, I have had similar experiences over the years. I am not saying that I am an expert in such predicaments, but perhaps we can at least compare some notes and learn from one another" (p. 96). Contrast Ipellie's good humour with Sherrill Grace's scholarly and complex analysis: "In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler analyses the ways in which gender identity works/is used to instate an hegemony of normative, hierarchical, asymmetric binaries that validate and enforce a phallogocentric heterosexuality" (p. 166). Also included is an edited transcript of a forum session in which Farley Mowat presented himself as his alter-ego, "Hardly-Knowit" (p. 108). The shifting styles and insights make the collection uneven and quirky, but add to both the book's charm and its accessibility. This book will elicit a variety of reactions. Those looking for contemporary literary analysis will find some very good papers, interspersed among traditional narratives and indigenous stories. Those preferring Inuit narratives will find those, but will also encounter some heavy, jargon-laden essays. Some will be annoyed by the complexity and diversity of literary styles, while others will find it captivating. The Preface provides a very good overview of the collection, hinting at its eclecticism and, appropriately, arguing that this is a strength, not a weakness, of the book. This volume would be very useful in senior undergraduate and graduate classes on northern images and literature and is particularly valuable for those readers interested in the multifaceted and multicultural ways of understanding Arctic experiences. It is standard, when reviewing collections of essays, to observe that there are inevitably stronger and weaker papers. Offering such a judgement in this instance is made more difficult by the diverse approaches that have been taken. While it is true that some papers are more original and insightful than others, the gap between the various contributions is not very large. Moreover, the real value of the book lies in the fact that each of the papers is a very good illustration of a particular approach to understanding Arctic

narratives. I do not wish to avoid the reviewer's responsibility entirely. I was quite taken by the contributions by Carpenter, Parkinson, Senkpiel, and van Herk. There were no essays that I did not find engaging and useful, but I was perplexed by Wayne Grady's comment under "Works Cited": "Wayne Grady would prefer not to supply notes. All references within his text may readily be discovered by the reader, should the reader wish to discover them" (p. 78). *Echoing Silence* endeavours, through a variety of story-telling and story-analyzing techniques, to explain how different cultures understand and explain their northern experiences. It is a book laden with insights, often found in unexpected places. It is virtually impossible for an edited collection to capture the spirit and dialogue of a symposium; as Moss admits in the preface, it is difficult to put on paper what began as a social event. Some of the stories, no doubt, are experienced very differently in person than on the page. Conversely, navigating the difficult waters of contemporary literary analysis is probably much easier in book form than during a formal symposium presentation. This said, however, *Echoing Silence* does a superb job of sharing the stories, perspectives, and narrative styles of the participants. Even more, it celebrates the complex voices and ideas circulating about the meaning and impact of the Arctic and the willingness and ability of writers, thinkers, and storytellers to continue sharing their insights and search for understanding.

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