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ARCTIC DREAMS: IMAGINATION AND DESIRE IN A NORTHERN LANDSCAPE

BARRY LOPEZ. 1986. Bantam Books, Inc., New York, N.Y. 417 pp., maps, appendices, bibliography, index. Paper \$5.95

Arctic Dreams is a many-faceted and sometimes passionate exploration of the North — "a conversation with the land," the author calls it — by an acclaimed American nature writer who here applies to brilliant effect his expertise in the fields of arctic biology, ecology, archaeology, ethnography and history.

Why are people drawn to the arctic? What do they see when they get there? These questions are Lopez's starting points. A good portion of the book is a meditation on perception. Preconception (what the north looks like in one's imagination) and desire (what one wishes to find there or to accomplish there) colour our perception. The fortune-seeker, the Inuit, the explorer/mapmaker, the biologist, the oilman, the big-city lawyer working on a land claim, the adventurer, the vacationer, the government official, the Irish monk of old in search of a place suitable for contemplation — each perceives the common elements of the landscape in a different way. Indeed, the Inuk situates himself in space differently from the way people of European extraction do.

There is no absolute reality, Lopez warns. No one can tell the whole story. "Any culture that would judge the perceptions of another is advised to proceed cautiously."

The natural elements of the landscape overlap the mythical ones at certain points, giving the book a powerful resonance. The narwhal's tusk, for example, was traded as the unicorn's horn was in the Middle Ages for twenty times its weight in gold. The Inuit, on the other hand, attach no great spiritual importance to the narwhal; to them it is a migratory food animal whose spirit is easily propitiated. Greenlanders valued the animal's skin above all other leathers for its suppleness when used to make dog harnesses. In time, however, the tusk lost its value as a trade item; dogs in the north are being replaced by snowmobiles and the narwhal's fate is now linked to hunting pressure and to profits for oil and gas wells in Lancaster Sound, an important summer feeding area.

Arctic Dreams is divided into eight chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter discusses some salient aspect of the north: the polar bear, the muskox, the narwhal, migrations, ice and light, perceptions of the north, arctic exploration. And each chapter offers scores of insights born of the author's research, detailed first-hand observations and a profound metaphysical (and, infrequently, political) inquiry.

His prose is strong and graceful.

sometimes he charges it with poetry: "In the [ice] pack, even a 250-ton ship could conceivably be crushed in two or three minutes, forced up in the air with an explosion of its oak ribs and driven under with a grunt, like a grand piano caught in an industrial press." He likens caribou moving through the Ogilvie Mountains to food smoke in a snowstorm."

Lopez's descriptive passages sparkle as account of the movements of a flock of Lesser Snow Geese is, I'll bet, as vivid and accurate as any such account you'll ever read), and his sensitivity to light and shades of colour in ocean, sky and ice is extraordinary. When he describes transient moments from his own experience, as a result of some encounter with the land or its animals, he usually does so in terms that convey their luminous qualities with great immediacy.

But *Arctic Dreams* is also, as it must be, a call for restraint on the part of mankind. "And we need a tolerance for the unmanipulated and unpossessed landscape...we need to understand the relationship between tolerance and different sorts of wealth, how a tolerance for the unconverted things of the earth is intertwined with the substance of a truly good life."

When we learn where to defer, the author states, we achieve the wisdom to which we have aspired for centuries.

Lopez expends on this theme gradually through the course of the book, and at the end he speaks of the "dignified relationship" that is possible between a person and the land. "A more radical enlightenment is necessary, in which humanity is understood as an innate qual-

where might the impetus for this new enlightenment be found? In the land. The things in the land fit together perfectly even though they are always

changing. I wish the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of the wind, the voice of a bird, the heading of a seed pod I see before me. This impeccable and indisputable integrity I want in myself."

The Arctic animals cunningly adapted to their environment, the harrowing experiences of the early explorers in a harsh, cold, testing landscape, the light and dark, the space and silence, "the great shift and expanse of life in the North," Lopez gathers up into a prodigious entity, between two paper covers.

Arctic Dreams is illuminating. It is a *tour de force*. — Reviewed by Bob Kohlmeier, 708 9th Avenue North, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7K 2Y9

TO WHOM THE WILDERNESS SPEAKS

LOUISE DE KIRILINE LAWRENCE. 1989. Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc. Toronto, Ontario. 180 pp. Illustrated by Aleta Karstad. Paper \$14.95. Originally published in 1980 by McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd.

This 1989 reprint of *To Whom the Wilderness Speaks* is the most recent volume in "The Legacy of Louise de Kiriline Lawrence," a high-quality softcover series undertaken by Natural Heritage. It is the seventh book by an author whose works have for more than four decades enchanted readers of all ages.

A collection of 24 short, popular pieces which originally appeared in the international magazine *Audubon*, its contents quickly reveal Lawrence's dual strengths — the sensitive ear and powerful expression of a poet and the tenacity and accuracy of observation of a scientist. First introducing the northern Ontario forest world and her place in it, she proceeds to describe the lives of its inhabitants through both solid fact and skillful verbal imagery. Phoebe, nuthatch, chickadee, squirrel and others come alive on her pages. Her story of finding Whip-poor-will and Common Nighthawk nests and watching them throughout the season evokes much of the mystery surrounding these birds of the night. In "The Apartments," nest holes in an old aspen provide safe home to six species. Lawrence's subtle humour shines through her lengthy and clever description of the comings and goings of Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, European Starling, Hooded Merganser and American Kestrel. "Enchanted Singer of the Tree-tops" recounts her study of the male Red-eyed Vireo who would appear to still hold the world record for songs in one day — 22,197 songs in 10 hours. We learn much about the male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a "master singer" who also helps incubate, and who sings, sotto voce, even on the nest. We find amusement, and amazement, in her tale of chickadees who come to take seeds from her hand but refuse to accept even her presence when she is wearing her muskrat coat.

Some of Lawrence's creatures die as well, for such selections as "The Blooded Tooth and Nail" illustrate a darker, though no less essential, side of nature. To keep herself from seeing cruelty in predation by a Merlin she sets about to study and understand its needs, and winds up caring for two young herself after the parents disappear. Her conclusion? "Life exists and is nourished by life

itself. In this there may be drama, but not tragedy."

Whatever her subject, it soon assumes its place as part of the "larger pattern" ever present in her writing. Lawrence constantly reminds readers of what she sometimes calls the "problem of conservation." How to reconcile conflicting interests of humanity and technology and environment and wildlife occupies much of her thinking. In analyzing something as basic as a backyard feeding station, she quickly reaches the essence of this conflict, where even to act or not act...has become most difficult to decide."

Though Lawrence might occasionally be admonished for letting her enthusiasm nudge her into anthropomorphism, the reader is nonetheless more willing to forgive — and to continue lighting in the clear, simple and elegant prose of a woman for whom English was not the first, but the fifth language. As Karstad's charming drawings add much to that enjoyment.

Daughter of a Swedish naturalist, Louise very early sensed her own place in nature's scheme. Her kinship with the land sustained her through family and personal tragedies during the difficult early years of the century. Twenty years later, in Canada, she was finally able to reassemble the scattered threads of her youth and rediscover her path. On a hill above Pimisi Bay she built the famous "loghouse nest" where she began her studies and the writing which has since enriched the lives of so many. Although an untrained amateur in the beginning, she soon gained reputation as a serious naturalist and respected ornithologist.

Inspired by the natural world, she has generously passed that inspiration and awareness on to countless others and in so doing has entertained them as well as

sharpened their vision. Those who read
in quiet, careful and detailed studies
emerge from that experience with a fresh
light in nature and a heightened under-
standing of the intricate web linking all
things. Those who read of the need to end
the destruction of the natural environment
and, in working together, to recover the
balance we have ourselves destroyed
will appreciate anew the urgency of those
simple imperatives. In 1989 the mes-
sage has never been more timely.

Lawrence was over 50 when she
produced her first "nature" book. She
completed the present work at age 86
and 5 years later her last essays. Now
she has finally slowed her pace. She
has had to leave her beloved forest and
no longer talks of writing other books

(Lawrence, *pers. comm.*). But, thanks to
Natural Heritage's well-conceived series
which brings back words long out of
print, she will continue to speak not only
to those who have long known her but
also to all who have yet to make that
important discovery.

Across two continents, through nine
decades, Louise de Kiriline Lawrence
has revered nature, sought to live ac-
cording to its "code" and to share her
vision. She seeks to share it still and,
through works which are as powerful
now as they have ever been, invites us to
join in her search — while we still have
time. — Reviewed by *Mary D. Gilliland*,
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katchewan. S7N 0K1



Northern Harrier young in nest

Juhachi Asai