

Extreme North: A Cultural History

Bernd Brunner

Jefferson Chase, Translator

W. W. Norton & Company (Feb 15, 2022)

Hardcover \$27.95 (256pp)

978-0-393-88100-4

About the history, fantasies, projections, and outright lies that have formed Western civilization's concepts of what's good, true, and beautiful, Bernd Brunner's panoramic cultural text *Extreme North* shows that the vast, frozen expanse at the top of the globe has long served as fodder for humanity's propensity to attribute mysterious, mystical qualities to places remote and unknown.

Heroic Norse legends and myths and tales of courageous seafaring Vikings (to others, known as pirates who ravaged and pillaged the coasts of Europe) add to the north's allure. But European history and culture, the writings of adventurers and explorers, human psychology, science, and theories of racial superiority are examined to argue that "the North" is as much a creation of the human imagination as it is a place. Lovely with its endless frozen vistas of unbroken whiteness, awe-inspiring fjords, the midnight sun, the glorious Aurora Borealis, and its ability to call forth the utmost from those who challenge its climatic rigors, the north can also be deadly, as is revealed through stories of those who failed to meet its tests.

Deadlier yet are the dark theories of white supremacy that were fed by Norse legends as interpreted by the nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner and appropriated by the Nazi regime to justify its reign of terror, selective breeding programs, and the horrors of the Holocaust. That these ideas still hold sway today, Brunner says, is evidenced by the existence of neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups and the deep-rooted belief that, of all peoples, those of Nordic descent represent "the highest and most perfect human imaginable."

Extreme North, in showing that the idea of "North" was, from the very beginning, an invention, also reveals that the north's pristine white expanses provided a blank canvas upon which the human heart revealed its own true intent.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January / February 2022)

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