

## Fram

**Steve Himmer**

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*An Arctic exploration becomes an exploration of the self as a man seeks a new understanding of connection with loved ones.*

The North Pole reveals itself to be not what government worker Oscar imagined in *Fram*, an artfully funny novel by Steve Himmer that raises numerous questions about the authenticity of life in modern society.

Oscar works for the Bureau of Ice Prognostication, a secret government agency tasked with making discoveries in the Arctic from the basement of its Washington, DC, office building. When he is sent on an actual mission to the North, Oscar must learn to cope with the sensations of movement and motion, and with what becomes true when one takes action.

Himmer explores the dissonance between images and reality as Oscar integrates his passive obsession with the Arctic into his lived experience. Oscar struggles with the tension between being present to what is before him on his adventure and his desire for the connection he feels to his phone screen. In many ways, Oscar is thrust into his own coming-of-age story—into a boyhood dream he might rather have continued to live out via his *National Geographic* subscription.

Oscar's journey also strips away the clutter that keeps him emotionally separated from his wife, Julia, who works for another secret government agency. Himmer tenderly examines the role everyday life plays in how much we hold back from those we love, even when so much of ourselves yearns not to.

The narrative is interspersed with vignettes about past Arctic explorations, as well as with scenes that imagine—or reimagine—the experiences of people native to or living in the North. The plot moves quickly, and the pieces that break from Oscar's story add texture both to the novel and to a landscape typically associated with expanses of white.

The humor here—the notion of a Bureau of Ice Prognostication, paperwork proving the existence of something because it is cheaper than actual exploration—is biting in its sharp rendering of the excesses of our own governing bodies. Fans of Paul Auster will appreciate the strangeness of Oscar's odyssey, as well as the search for identity and muted tenderness that lies within it.

MARGARET FEDDER (Spring 2015)

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