



A Woman in the Polar Night

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For most of us, the Arctic conjures up images of freezing and forsaken solitude. Hence, Austrian painter Christiane Ritter was at best ambivalent when her husband asked her to join him on the small Arctic island of Spitsbergen in a tarpaulin-covered hut sixty miles from the nearest neighbor. Yet his descriptions were filled not with cold and hardship but tales of remarkable wildlife, alluring light shows, and treks over water and ice. Won over, Ritter joined her husband and grew to love life on this small isle off Norway's coast, and in this charming memoir she describes her experiences, with insight and wry humor. Whether or not you ever plan a trip to the Arctic, *A Woman in the Polar Night* offers thoughtful reflections on isolation and the place the natural world holds in the human psyche.

A Woman in the Polar Night Details

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From Reader Review *A Woman in the Polar Night* for online ebook

Calzean says

This is one great tribute to the uniqueness of the Arctic and the power of living simply.

In 1934, the author spent a year in Spitsbergen Island, several hundred miles north of Norway in the Arctic. In a tiny hut shared with her husband and a young trapper they endure the cold, hunger and isolation with great love of their little world. While the life is harsh and daunting, the author reflects on how a simple life is so much better than the complexity of modernity and on the beauty of the Arctic landscape.

Kirstin says

Poetic and beautiful, Ritter writes like a painter, which in fact she was. The colours, the seasons, the plants and animals, the lifestyle and character of the Arctic occupants, all are carefully represented.

This book is very interestingly timed, juxtaposing the timeless power of the changing seasons and the stark beauty of the north with the growing turbulence of 1930s era Europe.

Some quotes I don't want to forget:

"And suddenly I realise that humanity is suffering from a severe vitamin deficiency because it cannot draw its strength directly from nature, eternally young and eternally true" (176).

"Around us the frozen sea, above us the deep sky full of returning birds. The consciousness of space and of unconquerable eternal life fills our being" (202).

And finally,

"No, the Arctic does not yield its secret for the price of a ship's ticket. You must live through the long night, the storms, and the destruction of human pride. You must have gazed on the deadness of all things to grasp their livingness. In the return of light, in the magic of the ice, in the life-rhythm of the animals observed in the wilderness, in the natural laws of all being, revealed here in their completeness, lies the secret of the Arctic and the overpowering beauty of its lands" (214).

What a pity this was Ritter's only publication...

jeniwren says

The author an Austrian painter was surprised when her husband asked her to join him on the small arctic island of Spitsbergen to live in a tarpaulin covered hut in isolation. The nearest neighbour was over sixty miles away. But she decided to go based on his descriptions of the amazing wildlife and night skies. She endured treks over ice, walking the perimeter of her hut to get some daily exercise, sharing a small hut with two men who as hunters left her alone for weeks on end. The hardship is described in great detail but the beauty of her surroundings are what make this an inspiring and beautiful read.

Uncle says

In 1934, the Austrian Christiane Ritter made the rather foolhardy choice to spend a year in the Arctic. She would spend the year in a tiny hut, her only companions her husband Herman, and his Swedish friend Karl. Both men were trappers who travel great distances to set and check their fur traps. The end result of her adventure was her slim but riveting memoir, *A Woman in the Polar Night*. The book was published in Germany in 1938, where it became a bestseller, and has never been allowed to go out of print. (Ritter herself lived to the remarkable age of 103, dying in 2000.) Michelle Paver drew upon Ritter's book for her Arctic ghost story, *Dark Matter*. Hopefully the success of Paver's novel will refocus attention of *A Woman in the Polar Night*.

Humans are obvious outsiders in the Arctic. The once unchallenged assumption that there is "nothing" in the Arctic, obviously points to our inability to conceive of natural life in an environment so obviously hostile to human survival. At first Ritter is disoriented by the quiet, open, snow-covered spaces, apparently devoid of natural life. But in time she comes to appreciate the nature of the Arctic, and to depend on it for her very survival.

Christiane Ritter is a wry observer, but her memoir is not an Arctic *The Egg and I*. The smallest mistake or slightest miscalculation can lead to fatal consequences. Before the menfolk depart, to leave her alone for weeks, they calmly present Ritter with a rifle in case the hut is attacked by polar bears.

In addition to the physical danger, Ritter must endure incredible mental strain. Ritter must learn to cope with the isolation, the silence, particularly during the period of permanent darkness when the sun disappears for months at a time. It is no wonder Michelle Paver set her ghost story in the Arctic. Spitsbergen is dotted with the graves of unknown trappers and failed settlers. The Swede Karl shares his knowledge of the island's creepy, macabre folklore. Little wonder Ritter thinks she is experiencing the uncanny, such as when she hears voices in the night, yet knows she is the only person around for miles.

Ultimately it is the author's transformation which makes *A Woman in the Polar Night* so compelling. She began her adventure not quite understanding the Arctic's strange hold on her husband. Yet after her experience, Ritter herself comes to almost dread her return to civilization. But the Arctic has given her a new-found appreciation for her own ability to take care of herself, and to survive brutal hardship. In real-life, Ritter never returned to the Arctic. But luckily for readers she penned her extremely readable and compelling memoir, *A Woman in the Polar Night*.

Stacy Stosich says

Now this is a well-written book. I chose it for my book club based on a recommendation from a friend, and I'm glad I did. I loved the ambivalence with which she describes the wild arctic nature. On the one hand she laments the lack of nature in our modern society--it's like she was making commentary on nature deficit disorder seventy years before it became a thing. She remarks that a connection to nature brings a certain serenity (as does connection to our work.) But on the other hand she describes being alone in the wild as a harrowing experience that can drive men crazy (and at the very least brings us to cling to the comfort of humanity and companionship when we have it).

I also loved the way she described the scenes with such imagery. Christiane was a painter, and you can tell in

the way she writes of the colors and lights in the Polar Night.

Lastly, it was just plain interesting to learn about how spooky and different living in the Arctic is. It was really interesting to hear how far light and sound could travel in such a barren landscape.

I feel like it's not doing this review justice to not load it full of quotes from the book, but I am currently feeling rather lazy. The part about the "terror of nothingness"...the part about the Northern Lights....the part about being "moonstruck." "One's entire consciousness is penetrated by the brightness; it is as though we were being drawn into the moon itself...I take it particularly badly, and the hunters maintain that I am moonstruck...Neither the walls of the hut nor the roof of snow can dispel my fancy that I am myself moonlight, gliding along the glittering spines and ridges of the mountains, through the white valleys..." (Amazingly this phenomenon has caused Arctic hunters to lose their minds and hurl themselves into the sea.) Just read the book. It wasn't a plot heavy book, but it was a good one.

Karyl says

A dear friend of mine saw that I was reading quite a few memoirs of people living in Alaska, far removed from modern civilization, and she suggested I read this book. I will always be grateful that she does.

Ritter is a young woman in 1934, married to a man who traveled to the Arctic on a scientific expedition, but who has decided to stay on indefinitely. He keeps asking her to spend a year with him in the Arctic, and finally she feels she is ready. And away she goes, leaving behind her small daughter, and travels to Svalbard, a small island that touches the 80th parallel, far north in the Arctic Ocean. She spends a full year there with her husband Hermann and his Swedish friend Karl, enduring not only loneliness (Hermann and Karl frequently leave on hunting trips, plus they are the only two humans she sees for much of that year) but terrible storms, extreme cold, food insecurity, and a lack of light.

Ritter's writing is absolutely gorgeous and lyrical. She brings to life so vividly the stark landscape of this tiny Arctic island and the hardships she endures. She begins to fall in love with the bleak island, even throughout the long, dark night that lasts months. And it is with great sadness that she returns to Europe, right as the world slides slowly towards another world war.

It boggles my mind that she and her companions went a full eight months without any kind of fresh meat. I can't understand why they didn't develop a raging case of scurvy. I was also amazed by how well she was able to hear and see in the clear air of the Arctic; she could hear the hunters talking even though they were miles away on one of their trips.

I am amazed at how well and gracefully Ritter endured the hardships of an Arctic winter. I can't say that I would have done nearly as well. My only regret is that I wish there were photographs included in the edition from the 1950s that I read. I would have liked to have seen a bit of her world.

Highly recommended.

Jessaka says

What beautiful writing with a great story, except sometimes she writes about trapping animals for the fur trade, which I am against. Still, she doesn't go into any detail, so if you have the mind to, you can let it go over your head like I had to do.

What would cause a woman to want to go live in the Arctic for a year? The young woman in this story is married to a man that is a hunter/trapper who takes expeditions to the Arctic and lives in a hut on the small island of Spitsbergen. He asks her to come live with him, and that is all it took for her to leave their young child. She takes off on a boat with a mirror, a feather bed, books, camel hair clothing, spoons, and herbs. Speaking of herbs, you have to find some way to spice up the meals that they end up eating. The feather bed and books were a good idea too, but everything in the hut got damp, very damp. But I once spent the night in a jungle with a wet wool blanket, and it kept me warm, so maybe feather beds are like that, still warm when damp.

One of the first things her husband does when she gets there is to leave her alone for 12 days while he goes hunting with his male friend who also lives with them. A snow storm came up, and she spent those days shoveling snow just to be able to get in and out of her hut and to prevent being buried. Are we having fun yet?

The sweet stories in this book were the ones about a white fox adopting them, as well as a seal later on. And at least neither of these men, who were hunting for both of those animals, harmed them.

Most of the book was about their surviving the long year, and then her writing about the beauty of the place. I wish that I could see it for maybe a week.

I had my chance to live in Pt. Barrow, Alaska when my friends and I were in Juneau. We were in a restaurant when a handsome man came to our table and sat down with us. Think Tom Selleck here. He wanted me to go to Pt. Barrow to live with him because his girl friend wouldn't go. I learned that He was a pilot. He also told me that the bears eat the natives, and that the natives rape women. Maybe he wasn't sure if he wanted me to go with him, because he didn't have a great sales pitch. I told him No and added how much I liked his flannel shirt, which he gave to me to keep. If he didn't have a girl friend, if he were monogamous, and if I only knew him better. Oh, well, I will never get to see the Northern Lights.

"It was a full moon. No central European can have any idea of what this means on the smooth frozen surface of the earth. It is as though we were dissolving in moonlight, as though the moonlight were eating us up. It makes no difference when we go back into the hut under the snow after a moonlight trip. The light seems to follow us everywhere."

"Northern lights of incredible intensity stream over the sky; their bright rays, shooting downward, looks like gleaming rods of glass. They break out from a tremendous height and seem to be falling directly toward me, growing brighter and clearer, in radiant lilacs, greens, and pinks, swinging and whirling around their own axis in a wild dance that sweeps over the entire sky, and then, in drifting undulating veils, they fade and vanish."

Sarah says

Christiane Ritter got used to the hunting. I never did!

But this is worth reading for the rare glimpse into Arctic life and Ritter's spare, luminous prose. She has some compelling insights.

Éponine says

Bellissimo resoconto di un anno passato a Spitsbergen, un'isola norvegese del Circolo Polare Artico. Christiane Ritter ha dimostrato una notevole forza di spirito nel sopravvivere in un capanno con la sola compagnia del marito e di un cacciatore del luogo. Una fatica che l'ha ricompensata, in quanto non aver avuto luce naturale per mesi, essere stata sola molto spesso e l'aver quasi rischiato la follia per il troppo pensare le ha dato una prospettiva totalmente diversa nell'osservare il mondo quando, alla fine, la vita ritorna finalmente a Spitsbergen.

Le bellissime descrizioni della notte che non finisce mai, mai lunghe e mai ripetitive, incantano letteralmente. E fanno venire voglia di visitare quei posti 'a Sud del nulla' proprio a me, che sono una freddolosa...

Ruth Charchian says

This book was recommended to me by a friend who raved about it. She was right. It proves, once again, that a few books written decades ago are not only relevant today but have a rare sustaining power to inspire and move us. Ritter is an artist who paints glorious and timeless pictures with her powerful ability to describe scene after scene with polished, refined, yet light and simple words. Readers can leave their chairs for a few hours and float to a place in the Arctic where most of us will never visit for a day much less a year she spent there. She lets us imagine the play of endless light, receding sunlight, and 24 hour darkness for months at a time and the effect it has on humans. It is the interaction of light on the landscape and respect for what nature offers that begins to grab us and pull us into her world. She lets us worry they won't be able to sustain themselves through the four month darkness living off only the stored supplies. We can hear the raging storms swirling for weeks at a time piling snow up and over their hut. We can hear ice pack breaking and smell the salty ocean. No wonder she decided to stay.

Suzy says

I am exhilarated after reading this memoir of the author's one year living in Spitsbergen Island, several hundred miles north of Norway in the Arctic. My head is spinning with the profoundness of the arctic experience and of Christiane's humor, reflections and revelations of her year in Spitsbergen. The author's husband had been living for a few years on the island, hunting and fishing, and had been encouraging her to come spend a year with him. She says on the first page of the book.

Then gradually the diaries that arrived in summer from the Far North began to fascinate me. They told of journeys by water and over ice, of the animals and the fascination of the wilderness, of the strange light over the landscape, of the strange illumination of one's own self in the remoteness of the polar night. In his descriptions there was practically never any mention of cold or darkness, of storms or hardships.

She agrees, leaving her small daughter with family in Germany and ignoring pleas about this being a

"hairbrain" scheme. She arrives in August and she does indeed live for a year with her husband and, as an added bonus, his hunting partner, Karl, a Norwegian. I wondered how she felt when she found, with no warning, that she would be living in a 10x10 hut with not just her husband but a strange man! Her writing is both matter of fact and lyrical, with never a mention of complaint. I think she survived through her good humor and through discovery - the "strange illumination of one's own self" and of seeing the world anew.

How varied are the experiences one lives through in the Arctic. One can murder and devour, calculate and measure, one can go out of one's mind from loneliness and terror, and one can certainly also go mad with enthusiasm for the all-too-overwhelming beauty. But it is also true that one will never experience in the Arctic anything that one has not oneself brought there.

I have so many lasting impressions from her writing, as if I were there with her. She creates vivid pictures of the midnight sun and of the "dead" polar night of not just darkness, but no signs of life beyond the three humans. In December in the dead of darkness, the mist lifts and the full moon rises to illuminate a surreal black and white vista. I also feel deeply what it was like to live with sensory deprivation, being trapped in a hut with storms raging outside, worrying if your husband would return from one of his many trips hunting for food. At one point all three were trapped in the hut for days on end. I thought "they need a deck of cards"!

The hut is a covered hollow, without which we would freeze; the primitive food must be eaten, for it keeps us alive. And we can even play with sooty cards, although hearts and diamonds are as black as spades. They help us to pass the time of darkness, and that is their value.

I kept wondering how her year in Spitsbergen would be experienced if it were done today. I'm certain she would have a satellite link and be blogging and tweeting about it. My thought is living in the polar night today would remove one from actually experiencing it the deep way that Chrissie, as she was called by her husband did. I searched for Spitsbergen and saw awe-inspiring photographs of the dramatic landscape I had just read about. I also saw that it is the location of the Global Seed Bank, something I have read about with interest over the years. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svalbard...> And I see they have cruises in the summer when there is open water. I thought for few minutes about taking one, but . . .

No, the Arctic does not yield its secret for the price of a ship's ticket. You must live through the long night, the storms and the destruction of human pride. You must have gazed on the deadness of all things to grasp their livingness. In the return of light, in the magic of the ice in the life-rhythm of the animals observed in the wilderness, in the natural laws of all being, revealed here in their completeness, lies the secret of the Arctic and the overpowering beauty of its lands.

I'm glad I was able to vicariously live through the long night through Ritter's memoir.

Alina says

It felt almost surreal, reading about Christiane's life in Svalbard for one year, the beauty of the nature, harsh environment, and the difficult conditions she had to encounter. As hard as it was for her, her memoir of this time is light and extremely poetic. I enjoyed every sentence and word written, frequently making printscreens of the pages, as the way she wrote was just so beautiful. I am glad I found this gem while preparing for my own trip to Svalbard, at the very edge of the Polar night but of course in the comfort of the

modern world, not as Christiane saw it in the thirties of the last century.

Amalia Gavea says

“No, the Arctic does not yield its secret for the price of a ship’s ticket. You must live through the long night, the storms, and the destruction of human pride. You must have gazed in the deadness of all things to grasp their livingness. In the return of light, in the magic of the ice, in the life-truths of animals obsessed in the wilderness...lies the secret of the Arctic and the overpowering beauty of its lands.”

I live in a country where the sun always finds a way to shine its light on us, even during the bleakest wintry days. Most normal people consider this a blessing. Me, on the other hand, being the weirdo that I am, I hate it with a vengeance. I just can’t stand sunshine and heat. When I had the opportunity to visit Finland a few years ago, I experienced the winter night and it was one of the most fascinating and happiest moments of my life. I mean, give me darkness and cold and I am a happy camper. I am also mad, but that’s okay. Still, nothing and noone can possibly prepare you for the circumstances Christiane Ritter describes in her beautiful book.

What a striking title...A beautiful cover and a fascinating woman who, despite all the odds, defied conventions, ignored every risk and followed her husband to an expedition in Svalbard, right in the heart of the Arctic. Christiane Ritter, an Austrian painter who died in 2000 at the age of 103, travelled to Norway in 1934 and found a land of immense beauty, silent and primal. Her account of the year she spent in Svalbard is a beautiful homage to the special landscape of the Arctic, a land that I often call “a planet within a planet”.

“The conflict between the weakening light of day and the triumphing light of the moon creates bewildering contrasts in the very clear, violently bleak landscape. New scenes appear whenever the sky lightens.”

This book contains treasure found in each page. Chrissie’s descriptions of the preparations for the coming winter, the hunting, the animals that used to be completely unknown to her, the magnificence of the fjords are fascinating but nothing compares to the chapters dedicated to the fortvilelse of the polar night, the enchantment, the bewildering and threatening glory of the night that never ends. She describes the last moment before the sun sets and the waiting for the darkness that will last for months in a chilling way, so vivid and almost ominous that brought chills even in a rather warm and humid Athenian May evening. The smoke that clinged on the floor and walls of the hut, the black landscape lit only by the whimsical starlight, Karl’s songs in the silence of the everlasting night...What setting could be more striking?

“Don’t go for walks alone”, says Karl. “It’s a dangerous time. Seven weeks before Christmas the graves in Svalband open.”

It is to be expected that my favourite parts are the ones dedicated to the beautiful, mystical Norwegian folklore. Ritter narrates Karl’s stories and the legends told by the sailormen and it is no surprise that most of them are related to death and the spirits of the dead. What kind of stories could be born in a land where the long night reigns, where the shadows acquire an otherworldly colour under the glorious veil of the Aurora Borealis...

This is a haunting, beautiful account. It’s not a dry log book. Far from it. Ritter included dialogues which made the reading experience even more interesting and direct and I felt I was reading a novel of the finest

quality. It is a calm, grounded narration from an immensely brave, considerate, determined woman, a striking personality who fell in love with the most beautiful spot of our planet. It is a pity she wasn't allowed to return there...If you aren't already in love with the Arctic and its enchantments, then this book will definitely help you come a little closer to the never-ending magic of the polar nights...

“...the world out-of-doors falls into deepest night. The mountains are no more than white shadows, the sea no more than a black shadow- until that too dissolves away. And then everything is dead.”

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com>

Spencer says

"To live in a hut in the Arctic had always been my husband's wish-dream. Whenever anything went wrong in our European home, a short circuit, a burst pipe, or even if the rent was raised, he would always say that nothing like that could happen in a hut in the Arctic." So begins this account of one woman's year in the arctic. As a child, I had few worse experiences than boy scout Klondike camping trips. They were miserable experiences full of long, hallucinated nights and bleak days. But this book really made me want to head north for a year and experience the awesome beauty of nature where life is most inhospitable. Delightful and haunting. Great read.

Belledunuit says

Roman documentaire intéressant à découvrir. Le seul reproche que je lui ferai c'est que j'ai trouvé les personnages peu attachés l'un à l'autre et cela m'a déconcertée tout au long de ma lecture. Par contre, la description de la vie dans l'Arctique ainsi que celles sur les paysages sont très impressionnants.
