

BOOK REVIEW

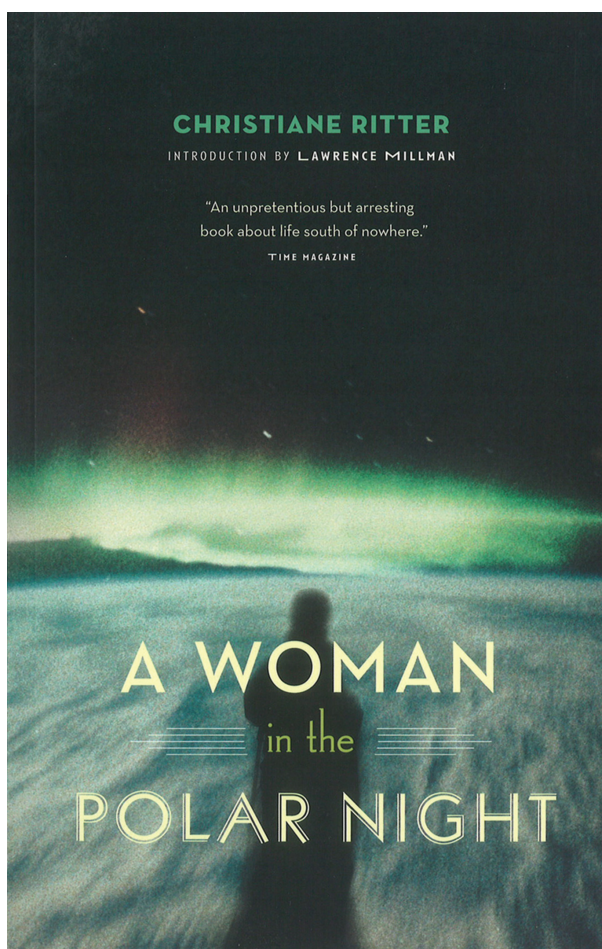
Review of *A woman in the polar night*, by Christiane Ritter, translated by Jane Degras and with an introduction by Lawrence Millman (2010). Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books. 215 pp. ISBN 978-1-55365-540-4.

Like many other first-time Arctic explorers, Austrian Christiane Ritter (1897–2000) claims to have been inspired by the reports of others. In her case, she decided to travel to Spitsbergen after reading the diaries written and sent to her by her husband Hermann, who had spent three winters there as a hunter–trapper. *A woman in the polar night*, Ritter’s eloquent account of her experiences while overwintering with him in Gråhuken on Wijdefjorden in the mid-1930s, also has the form of a journal. Apart from an introductory chapter sketching the background of her journey, and underscoring her own complete ignorance of what she had in store, it is written mainly in a continual present tense. This allows the reader to follow her evolving perspective on life in the Far North—as well as on European culture viewed from a distance that gradually becomes mental as well as geographical. The book is therefore full of firsts: from “the first glimmerings of the relentless nature of the Arctic” (p. 25), to her first experience, towards the end of her stay, of sharing her husband’s “hunting fever” (p. 198).

A woman in the polar night was originally published in German in 1938 under the title *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht* and has deservedly become a modern classic of Arctic literature. The first edition was privately printed and illustrated by the author with several small line drawings and six watercolours that are pasted into the book. Most of the watercolours are sensitive evocations of Spitsbergen landscapes and natural phenomena. The line drawings are quick playful sketches that highlight details and episodes mentioned in the text—such as a *komaga* (traditional soft-leather boot) filled with straw, their hut like “a tiny box thrown up by the sea” (p. 26), the smoking stove, Hermann Ritter returning in a storm, sea birds in flight and hanging dead from his rifle. The many expressive images are clearly an integral part of the text, and it is therefore a pity that this re-issue of the English translation (from 1954) does not include any of them. They substantiate Ritter’s repeated references to herself as an artist and help to explain her painterly

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approach to all that she observes. One memorable passage, for example, compares the twilight scenes during the beginning of the Arctic night with “the delicate, wonderful paintings of the Chinese painter–monks, in which the immense and mysterious effect is achieved entirely by gradations from light to dark grey, by forms indicated rather than outlined” (p. 109).

Arriving in Spitsbergen in August 1934, Ritter finds the coast “comfortless, bleak, and stony” and their hut “wretched” (pp. 23, 34). One year later, when she very reluctantly returns on her own to a continental Europe on the verge of war, the hut has been transformed into a home and she into a Spitsbergen enthusiast like her husband. She has discovered new dimensions of time and space, marvelled at the changing colours of the landscape and radiant light of the Arctic sky, and survived both terrific storms and months of complete darkness. At the same time, she has learnt something about human

“ant-like smallness” in the face of boundless inhospitable nature (p. 73). However, terror and hardship are much less prominent in her account than pleasure—not least the pleasure of extending her own mental and physical powers.

As an overwinterer Ritter was a pioneer, a fact that she has chosen to convey only indirectly via a story in an old newspaper used as wrapping, where she is mentioned as “the first European woman to spend the winter so far north” (p. 115). But gender is an important dimension of her narrative. Because she defines herself as a housewife first and foremost, her main focus is on the challenges of housekeeping under primitive and often adverse conditions. She cooks, cleans and does the laundry, rinsing clothes in an icy spring; she copes with piles of mending; she learns to prepare eider duck and seal meat; she sews curtains of a piece of blue-striped linen brought by her husband to Spitsbergen as a bedcover and then used as a sail—her labours are evoked in vivid details. Before leaving home, she had imagined that a winter in the

Arctic would mean an indoor life by the fire, and that she would be able to watch the events of the polar night unrolling before her as though “sitting in a warm comfortable seat in the cinema” (p. 12). The reality she describes is of course completely different. Ordinary domestic tasks require great effort, and through her constant struggle against the elements she discovers in herself “a strength I did not think I possessed, with a kind of savage recklessness, which seizes me afresh each day” (p. 95).

Although Jane Degras’s English translation well catches the vividness and lyrical qualities of the German original, it ought to have been updated for this new edition. Particularly, the consistent use of “men” for “Menschen”—in phrases such as “the world of men” for “der Menschenwelt”—looks strange and alienating to a modern reader accustomed to gender-neutral terms (p. 116). Hence, while Ritter emphatically represents the Arctic as a world belonging to women as well as men, the translation paradoxically suggests otherwise.