

## Book Review

**Gunilla Hermansson/Jens Lohfert Jørgensen:** *Exploring NORDIC COOL in Literary History* (= FILLM Studies in Languages and Literatures 15). Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2020.

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Literary history should not be seen merely as a linear and consistent narrative that simply places authors, works and periods in chronological order, often in the form of a reference manual for the benefit of students, teachers or other interested readers. In recent years, as highlighted by Sascha Bru, Ben De Bruyn and Michel Delville (2016) and Paul Aron (2017), literary history has in fact become a theoretical and methodological framework that enables different approaches to identify a focal point for working together, in order to study literature as a communicative, cultural and artistic practice embedded in history and society. With this in mind and drawing on David Perkins' (1992) observation that traditional, national narratives, which pretend to be thorough and unifying, are typically "impossible" to write, are there in fact potentially new ways of writing literary history? Furthermore, if the practice of literature increasingly results in communication across borders, as observed by Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés (2002), does this mean then, that a regional (in this case Nordic) literary history, can be considered a viable option, when it comes to avoiding the fallacies of national teleology, whereby literature is intended to fulfil a purported final goal of the nation, usually in connection with the definition of identity? These are some of the pertinent questions raised by *Exploring NORDIC COOL in Literary History*, edited by Gunilla Hermansson (University of Gothenburg) and Jens Lohfert Jørgensen (Aalborg University), also authors of its "Introduction".

This work makes for an ample read, consisting of 20 contributions, authored in English by 21 scholars based in Nordic countries and universities. The contributions present independent, specific case-studies, located in almost all of the cultural and literary areas in Scandinavia and the North (Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland and Sápmi), with the exception of the Faroe Islands, where one of the five North-Germanic languages is spoken, so the Islands could, in fact, have been included in the project.

As the editors point out, the Nordic countries share some fundamental traits in history, geography, society and politics, as well as in culture and language, so that they can be perceived as a unit, a region with specific characteristics. This said, the differences among the countries are also relevant and should not be overlooked. The

editors refer to one predecessor in particular, and the attempt to write a (post) modern Nordic literary history. The case in point is the first volume of *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History* (2017), edited by Dan Ringgaard and Thomas A. DuBois, that focuses on “spatial nodes” based on the research into place and space in literature that has been pursued in recent decades.

The guiding principle that *Exploring NORDIC COOL* has chosen, in order to experiment with new approaches to literary history, is the polysemic word “cool”. Its different meanings can relate to latitude, climate, environment and weather; it can furthermore describe character, feelings and emotions, hence human relations and relations between the sexes; finally, it can convey a positive image or brand of northern Europe as an attractively progressive region of the world: innovative, dynamic and open to novelty, especially in matters of aesthetics.

*Exploring NORDIC COOL* recalls *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History* with its likewise postmodern, discontinuous and polycentric narrative, as advocated by Perkins. Each contribution to *Exploring NORDIC COOL* is self-contained and can be read as a single entity, but the common denominator, expressed in the book’s title, creates a network of connections that offers the reader added value. Some articles tend more towards an overview of traditional literary history, whilst others are more focused on the analysis and interpretation of the texts under examination, or on their reception history. On the whole, however, *Exploring NORDIC COOL* avoids the juxtaposition and the mutual exclusion of internal versus external reading, or of close versus distant reading. On the contrary, interpretation and contextualisation interact in a way that is useful for the generation of new knowledge, whether this be through well-known classics or lesser known or purportedly marginal works.

An in-depth account of each contribution is not possible here, but some recurring themes can be noted. The literary representation of “nordicity” (a term coined by Canadian geographer Luis-Edmond Hamelin and developed by Canadian literary scholar Daniel Chartier) – is a core topic in the articles by Henning Howlid Wærp, Lars Handesten, Sissel Furuseth and Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson; the former two, focus on travel and exploration in polar areas, whilst the latter two, on life in circumpolar areas. A common trait in these articles is the critique of a traditionally masculine, aggressive and conquering mentality, as well as ecocritical concerns. In addition, both Furuseth and Jóhannsson highlight how the far North, with its wilderness and harsh living conditions, but also purity, can offer refuge from the evils of modernity in both modern classics (Knut Hamsun, Gunnar Gunnarsson) and contemporary, environmentally conscious works. Even Anne Heith’s article has, in some respects, a connection to the aforementioned contributions, as it deals with Sámi artists and writers, who have claimed the right to their own identity, free expression, history and geography (Sápmi), and who have criticised former policies of colonisation and oppression by the southern nation-states.

From a more philosophical stance, the articles by Dan Ringgaard and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson discuss the literary depiction of the human condition, when it is confronted with impressive yet violent natural phenomena, which are typical of Northern weather and landscape. Interestingly, they draw different conclusions. Ringgaard analyses a contemporary Danish historical novel about the astronomer Tycho Brahe (Harald Voetmann, *Alt under månen*, 2014), in which the scientific observation of changeable and violent weather conditions offers a counternarrative to the Renaissance dream of a central, autonomous human position, from which Man can control and dominate the universe. Egilsson, on the other hand, studies the Icelandic literary imagery that since Romanticism has been moulded by the theory of the sublime, by which the impressive and overwhelming aspects of nature can be mastered, and even aesthetically contemplated, by human consciousness.

A critical scrutiny of colonial and racial relations in literary works from the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as a focus on gender relations and emotions, intertwined with economic and social factors, are seen in the article on Karin Boye by Therese Svensson, as well as in the article on Maria Jotuni and Elin Wägner by coauthors Katarina Leppänen and Kukku Melkas, and also in the article on Herman Bang by Signe Leth Gammelgaard.

The dimensions of a 'cool' and stoic character in both medieval and early modern literature are examined in the articles by Per Thomas Andersen, Lohfert Jørgensen and Carin Franzén. Here, the case studies presented, clearly show how a history of Nordic literature would be inconceivable without considering the broader system of European culture and literature. Andersen questions the assumption that the brave and emotionless reactions towards physical pain and torment, typical of the heroes of Old Norse literature, especially in the Icelandic sagas, are the result of a commonly observed (thus typically Nordic) emotional response. On the contrary, he highlights the literary and rhetorical models imported from Christian European literature, through the abundant work of translation of the legends of martyr saints into Old Norse. Lohfert Jørgensen sees the connection between Leonora Christina Ulfeldt's stoic coolness, as depicted in her memoirs *Jammers Minde*, and the notion of *apatheia* (emotionlessness), a mental strength which implied full reliance on God's will, and was reinforced by the reception of Seneca in the European Renaissance. Franzén discusses Queen Christina's complicated, even contradictory, image and self-image, as a mixture of stoic self-control, by which reason and free will can master passions, and search for a libertine art of existence. What was not contradictory was Christina's will to find her own way through the fixed gender codes of her time.

If the image of the North has become 'cool' in the world, literature has proved to be a powerful means of spreading it. Cultural mediation through translation plays an important role in this intercourse, as shown in the cases examined by Heidi

Grönstrand, Andrea Castro (the only contribution that observes the North from the point of view of another literature, in this case Argentinian), Hermansson and Åsa Arping. Grönstrand discusses an unusual, bilingual book, Philippe Guicheteau's *Sunday Letters from Finland* (1999), written in both French and Finnish, based on the interesting experiment of including the Finnish translation within the book itself along with the French original, therefore defying traditional notions such as original text, single authorship, and a precise belonging to one national literature or another: whether French or Finnish, or both. Hermansson closely examines the Swedish Romantic poem "Vårvindar friska" by Julia Nyberg and, in particular, the paths of its transnational and transmedial reception and adaptation from poetry to song to cinema, which also entails its passage from (popular) ballads to high literature and again to popular culture. Reception history highlights here "at one and the same time the instability of texts and their durability in different media" (219). Arping analyses the successful reception of Fredrika Bremer's novels in the United States, especially in the 1840s, and interprets this as the younger nation's need to create its own literary identity through translation, avoiding too strong an influence by British models. In this respect, the Swedish writer's novels about bourgeois domestic life, focusing on women's experiences, offer the right mixture of recognisable modernity and Nordic exoticism.

As already mentioned, "cool" can refer to an experimental attitude in artistic practice, and this is the focus of the articles by Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, Tania Ørum and Hans Kristian S. Rustad, which also form the final section of *Exploring NORDIC COOL*. Zetterberg Gjerlevsen 'discovers' a hitherto scarcely considered Danish novel by Carl August Thielo, *Den grønne April* (1760), with no traditional plot or narrative structure, with the unpredictable April weather as the unifying element. The work, the author argues, is intentionally fragmentary, digressive, inconsistent and playful, in a fashion that recalls a contemporary (and eternal) masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne. Ørum assesses the practice and impact of the kind of Danish concrete poetry practiced by Hans-Jørgen Nielsen and other authors in the 1960s: apparently a cool minimalism (materiality of the artwork, reduced complexity, a nothing-to-interpret stance), but also an expression of a radically democratic movement, nourishing a passionate and warm political dream of a society without hierarchies. Rustad too comments on the combination of a cool surface and the underlying warm and passionate engagement, in his analysis of Johannes Heldén's *Astroecology* (2016), a digital, ecocritical work, with dystopian and apocalyptic traits. Digital literature represents, for us all, a challenging and 'cool' frontier.

The many qualities of *Exploring NORDIC COOL* have been pointed out, but are there limits to this kind of project? Choosing "cool" as the all-encompassing idea behind the book brings with it a risk of vagueness. At times, all references to "cool"

can seem somewhat forced by the book's framework. On the other hand, the concept has proved to be successful in fostering a multifarious exploration of literary expressions and their historical dimensions – a point of departure for further investigations.

Another limit is that the comparative, inter-Nordic analysis is not prominent within each contribution, with certain exceptions (Handesten in particular, but also Howlid Wærp, Furusest, Jóhannsson and Leppänen/Melkas). Nevertheless, a comparative image of literary activity in the North is formed in the reader's mind thanks to the structure of the book, conceived by the editors, and by the way it brings each section together.

Further inquiry of the kind offered by Hermansson and Arping is certainly desirable: receptions, adaptations and translations of facets of coolness outside the North. As Hans Robert Jauss puts forward in his essay "Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft" (1967; 1970), a useful provocation for the "science of literature" consists in the fact that a literary work's historicity should not be limited to an examination of its genesis, the author, and his or her historical time but should include the work's historical travel through time, space, language, culture and "horizons of expectation". In this respect, I think that the seminal value of Jauss' essay is oddly underrated and somewhat overshadowed by the aforementioned, recent theoretical studies (*Exploring NORDIC COOL* included), which after all seek to bring *Literaturgeschichte* back to the fore of *Literaturwissenschaft*.