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This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons In Greenland



Synopsis

For the last decade, Gretel Ehrlich has been obsessed by an island, a terrain, a culture, and the men and women who long for and love the complex frailties and treacherous beauty of a world defined by ice. Greenland, the world's largest island, 840,000 square miles in extent, is covered by the largest continental ice sheet in the world. Only the rocky fringe of its coast is habitable. There, the Inuit, the Arctic's first explorers, have survived and thrived in the harshest of climates. For the Inuit, an ice-age, ice-adapted people who first traveled from Siberia across the polar North six thousand years ago, weather is consciousness. In a world composed of ice and darkness, water and light, where skins of dog, seal, bear, even hare and eider duck, are sewn into clothes, tents, and sleeping bags as protection, where transport is by dogsled and kayak, the only rein for the uncontrollable force of weather is an unbending self-discipline. The blend of physical endurance and psychological perseverance required for daily existence first drew Ehrlich to this terrain. Her guide, her inspiration, her companion in spirit was the great Danish-Inuit explorer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen. Between 1902 and his death in 1933 he launched seven expeditions: to record the unknown history and customs of the nomadic Eskimos; to chronicle the skills, beliefs, and crafts that made life in this climate possible and a matter of grace. For Rasmussen, all true wisdom is only to be found far from the dwellings of man, in great solitudes. As she followed his trail, Ehrlich was to find the things that can open the mind to what is hidden from others. This Cold Heaven is at once a distillation of her many journeys, a path into a world divided into darkness and light and, finally, an attempt to capture the clarity that blinds us with surprise.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Greenland isn't green at all, but the world's largest island is covered by the biggest continental ice shelf in the world. Sparsely populated on the rocky outer fringes of its 840,000 square miles, it's probably as unknown to Americans as anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere. Gretel Ehrlich knows its ice leads and midnight sun as well as any American, and probably as well as any non-Inuit except for a handful of Danes, whose territory it is. That's because she's obsessed with the North in general and with Greenland in particular. Over the past decade, she has traveled to the frozen island at least seven times, staying for months at a stretch, traveling long distances by dogsled, making friends with hunters and villagers, and participating in seal and polar bear hunts. Erlich chronicles her trips and relationships in a new book called "This Cold Heaven." ((...) 377 pages, Pantheon Books) She does far more than record her own journeys, however. She also puts Greenland into cultural, historical, and anthropological perspective by weaving her trips with those of Knud Rasmussen, who died in 1933 after traversing the polar North from Greenland to Alaska. Even now, some of Greenlandic culture is largely unchanged from the days when Rasmussen and his close friend Peter Freuchen made "first" contact with some of the bands of isolated Inuit (Eskimos) on the island. Bears, seals, hare, fox and walrus are still hunted for food, clothing and fuel made from blubber, dogsled is still the chief method of land transport, and ancient stories and religion abound. There are modern encroachments, however - Danish bureaucracy, snowmobiles, alcohol, helicopters, and cars, to say nothing of the enormous American military base at Thule.

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