

A Review of 'Swedish Gothic: Landscapes of Untamed Nature'

Ive Brissman
Lund University

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Yvonne Leffler, *Swedish Gothic: Landscapes of Untamed Nature* (London: Anthem Press, 2023), 83 pp., £20.99 (pbk), ISBN-13: 978-1-83998-0-336.

Since the 1990s, Gothic studies have been established as an interdisciplinary field that explores the Gothic texts and tradition. Yvonne Leffler, professor of comparative literature, contributes with a study of Gothic from Sweden. Leffler offers a broad historical perspective that ranges from the early nineteenth century and the first appearance of gothic novels in Sweden to contemporary novels and works in film and TV series. While Swedish gothic is part of the transnational Gothic tradition inspiration mostly comes from Anglo-Saxon and German works, some features are specific in Swedish gothic stories. This concerns the characters from Swedish folklore such as trolls, werewolves, and witches, but more so, the novel's relation to place or the protagonists' relation to the landscape. The landscape is not simply the background for the events to unfold, but rather a character which actively contributes to the narrative. This is distinctive from the Anglo-Saxon gothic novels where the castle is central. As the Swedish landscape shifts throughout the country, these gothic stories take place in dark forests and woodlands, the archipelago of the North Atlantic or the Baltic Sea, the mountains of the northern part of the country, and Sàpmi, the home of the indigenous Sàmi people of the north. The narrativization is constructed in intimate relation to these places, and this is done by using local lore and legends and place-specific descriptions.

The book is structured in three themes: the Nordic wilderness and its monstrous creatures, the gendered coded landscapes and transgressive monster, and Nordic noir and Gothic Crimes. Leffler demonstrates that Swedish Gothic is a highly place-focused version of the Gothic genre where the Nordic landscape is seen as the wilderness. The untamed nature is a place for encounters with the monstrous other, often represented by nature beings from old myths, regional folklore, and popular belief. The landscape is a space of fear, a haunted space inhabited by devious mythical creatures known from myths and popular beliefs. Leffler writes, 'It is a malevolent and dangerous space located beyond places of civilisation and urban modernity. In Nordic folk tales and popular imagination, the forest is associated with danger, supernatural phenomena, and pagan powers of nature' (p. 31). Leffler sheds light on a feature that is specific to the Swedish context where the pre-Christian, pagan powers represent the frightful, wild, but also powerful forces. When the protagonists encounter nature and the undomesticated landscape, they also face their dark side, triggered by untamed nature and the pagan, pre-Christian past of the region.

A further difference towards Anglo-American Gothic concerns gender and landscapes and what is recognised as male and female characteristics. Leffler finds that Swedish gothic novels and movies do not recognise gender roles. Instead, there is a gendered landscape and wilderness, as well as a male and female way of exploring local popular beliefs and the associated ideas of magic, from the mid-nineteenth century until today. Gothic crime is a genre that is special for Sweden, while it is a sub-genre of Nordic noir, it is characterised by crime investigations which are obstructed

by seeming supernatural elements linked to the Nordic landscape and its past. Here the intervention of supernatural events or powers offers an alternative structure of causes and effects that makes the audience reconsider the motives behind the crime and sometimes even the nature of the phenomenological world.

The 2017 novel *In the Month of the Midnight Sun* by Cecilia Ekbäck is set in the year 1856 in northern Sweden; it is a landscape shaped by the colonization by the Swedish nation of the Sámi land and population, a landscape where the colonial past is present. There is an explicit ecological message where ‘the true monster is the anthropocentric view on the environment and its local Indigenous populations, no matter if it is another ethnic minority, species, or lifeform’ (p. 66). In this contemporary take on the gothic narrative, the theme of humans causing the environmental crisis is central to the relationship between humans and nature. Humans are not only guilty of suppressing nature or extinction, but their worst felony is that they have dispatched all unsympathetic beings and prior populations to another dimension, to the world of myth and folktales. The distinction between human and untamed nature is markedly ambiguous, Leffler concludes.

The untamed landscape is beyond human control: it is the wilderness, a space of trial and temptation which is ambiguous, not only because it is questioning who is human or who is monstrous, but it also concerns identity and morality in relation to *the other*, that is the creatures of folklore and the forests. Such ambiguous creatures are the trolls, which have a special role in Nordic folklore as humanlike creatures but neither human nor beast. Trolls in the *fin de siècle* novels are shapeshifters and humanised, in contemporary fiction they are given an ambivalent sexuality that plays with gender roles, as the character Tina in the 2018 movie *Border (Gräns)*, where the theme of folklore is posed into a narrative that negotiates gender norms. This ambivalence is analysed in Stacy Alamo’s term ‘trans-corporeality’ which describes the human body as intermeshed with the environment and non-human nature (p. 4).

This book is published by Anthem Books as part of the series that covers the field of Gothic studies from various themes, countries, and perspectives. The book provides a presentation of works that fall into the category, with some examples receiving only brief attention, while others are analysed more extensively. Through a long-time perspective, ranging from the early 19th-century romanticism novels to today’s intermedia field, the changes in themes and representations are mapped. In this way, the book serves as an initiated guide, which can inspire further reading and studies. While it is written by a literature scholar, it offers a point of departure for multidisciplinary research on the themes highlighted in the book, such as scholars from disciplines such as history, ethnology, folklorists, or religious studies can contribute with their perspectives. Hence, this book is a promise of further exploration of the untamed Nordic landscape and the creatures that inhabit these wild places.

References

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Ive Brissman
Lund University
ive.brissman@ctr.lu.se

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Lund University

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