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INTERVIEW

Tricking the Troll: A Conversation with Berit Ellingsen on the Anthropocene and Literature

Andrew Hageman[1] and Berit Ellingsen[2]

[1] Luther College, US

[2] Independent Writer, NO

Corresponding author: Andrew Hageman (hagean03@luther.edu)

This conversation brought together Berit Ellingsen, the acclaimed writer of novels, short stories, non-fiction pieces, and video game criticism and fiction, with Andrew Hageman, a scholar who researches and teaches intersections of techno-culture and ecology. Ellingsen's recent novel, Not Dark Yet (2015), has established her as an ascendant figure in the world of speculative, perhaps "weird," fiction, and Jeff VanderMeer has praised it in his list of favorite book reads of 2015 as a significant contribution to fiction that engages the strangeness of coming to consciousness of climate change, referring to the novel as, "An ambiguous and luminous and mysterious text that changes shape and meaning on rereading, as with all the best fiction." What follows is a conversation that unfolded over several conversational sessions spanning the Northern hemispheric late summer and autumn of 2016, as Andrew experienced the prolonged flooding of his basement in Northeast Iowa due to unusually high rainfalls, as well as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Their conversation reflects on and engages with this emerging world of strange weather and strange days to articulate the roles of literature and the arts in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene; weird fiction; ecology; ecocriticism; Scandinavian fiction

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Berit is the author of three novels, *Now We Can See The Moon* (Snuggly Books), *Not Dark Yet* (Two Dollar Radio), and *Une Ville Vide* (PublieMonde), a Rococo-style novella (forthcoming), a collection of short stories, *Beneath the Liquid Skin* (Queen's Ferry Press), and a mini-collection of dark fairy-tales, *Vessel and Solsvart* (Snuggly Books). Her work has been published in W.W. Norton's *Flash Fiction International*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Unstuck*, *Litro*, and other places, and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and the British Science Fiction Association Award.

Not Dark Yet (2015) established her as an ascendant figure in the world of speculative, perhaps "weird," fiction,[1] and Jeff VanderMeer has praised it in his list of favorite book reads of 2015 as a significant contribution to fiction that engages the strangeness of coming to consciousness of climate change, referring to the novel as, "An ambiguous and luminous and mysterious text that changes shape and meaning on rereading, as with all the best fiction."[2] Berit is a member of the Norwegian Authors' Union. More information is available at http://beritellingsen.com.

What follows is a conversation that unfolded over several conversational sessions spanning the Northern hemispheric late summer and autumn of 2016, as Andrew experienced the prolonged flooding of his basement in Northeast Iowa due to unusually high rainfalls, as well as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Their conversation reflects on and engages with this emerging world of strange weather and strange days to articulate the roles of literature and the arts in the Anthropocene.

A.H. You bring a sophisticated combination of scientific and literary education, experience and expertise to thinking through a concept like the Anthropocene. Would you talk about how this combination functions for you as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction? And would you talk about the roles you see literature playing in what the concept of the Anthropocene is and does and makes happen?

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[1] "Weird fiction" is a somewhat nebulous generic term, referring to narratives with settings and/or events that are both strange and very close to contemporary reality. Examples span from H.P. Lovecraft's combinations of horror, science fiction, and exploration to recent work by China Mieville and Ann & Jeff VanderMeer, including the latter's edited volume, *The New Weird* [2008].

[2] See "Jeff VanderMeer's Epic List of Favorite Books Read in 2015," available at https://electricliterature.com/jeff-vandermeers-epic-list-of-favorite-books-read-in-2015-2e9370a71ebf#.vjt8d2iog.

B.E. Thank you so much for saying that. Writing popular science articles has always been useful for writing fiction, and vice versa, writing fiction has improved my science writing. There are differences in style and scope and many other things, of course, but presenting ideas and thoughts with clarity so that everyone can follow them, having a definite sense of what sequence these thoughts and ideas should be presented in to create a narrative that is easy to follow, and being mindful of the "tension" and rising or falling actions of the story, is useful in both types of writing. I see working with language and its many rules and possibilities in both fiction and non-fiction as a lifelong learning process.

The potential of literature to communicate to the public and decision makers what the Anthropocene is and its various effects on the world is fairly large. Psychologically we respond more readily to narratives, especially ones with humans in them, than to facts or numbers alone. Successful media organizations and NGOs manage to do this well to spread their message to as many people as possible. This may also be the reason why some scientific organizations have a harder time communicating their findings and knowledge to the public. Part of the Anthropocene is a very high degree of information noise and "curation" that is difficult to break through, even with messages of warning or alarm. But literature's focus and expertise with narrative might help communicate such messages.

Some months ago I came across an observation by an author that) the current global changes in climate and environment should be all we write and talk about. But so far surprisingly few writers do. Recently, academics at Yale-NUS held a survey of climate change fiction. The survey listed only about fifteen novels, including *Not Dark Yet*. That was fewer than I had expected.

A.H. Since you brought up that survey and its list of climate change fiction, or what some are calling, perhaps branding, "cli-fi," I'd like to hear you comment on two things.[3] First, perhaps you could walk us through some of the processes of a literature maker who navigates particular concerns if not objectives alongside the task of craft-

[3] For more on "Cli-Fi," including Dan Bloom's initiation of the term, see Andrew Hageman "Karel Čapek Energies: The Absolute at Large as Proto-Cli-Fi Literature," available at http://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/czech-book/.

ing a story. Put another way, what's your take on didacticism in ecologically-engaged fiction writing? And, second, would you say a bit about the notion of "cli-fi" as a subgenre or brand? What do you think about the way this notion is used to market, maybe even to write, literature?

B.E. I really don't like the term, and not only because it sounds vaguely obscene (as I've seen some people comment), but because it tries to separate fiction concerned with the climate from other kinds of fiction. In the future all fiction will be written in a world where the climate has changed greatly. Of course, this fiction of the future may not be primarily concerned with the climate, and climate may not be overtly visible in the stories, but the lives and events this fiction will describe will be strongly affected by the changing climate and the changing world.

Moreover, an attempt at calling all fiction that focuses on climate change "cli-fi" makes it sound like it's just another subgenre of sci-fi, and this fiction can thus more easily be dismissed as pure speculation with only the slightest grounding in fact. This label can also obscure more than it clarifies, and the Anthropocene is a subject which doesn't need any more confusion or cognitive selectiveness.

About the first question: it is of course important but maybe also harder to avoid sounding dogmatic or preachy concerning climate change topics. For people who are completely against the idea of climate change being a fact, any mention of the issue will sound dogmatic anyway. In contrast, those who are already open to the idea may want facts or more clarification of the complexities of climate science.

A.H. In Donna Haraway's recent work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she's argued that instead of the Anthropocene, Chthulucene is the term we should apply to the phase of ecological catastrophe in which we live. Her suggestion is perhaps the most literary among a range of alternative names, such as the Capitalocene and Thanatocene, being proposed as part of the ongoing work of articulating the parameters and ramifications of this new paradigm shift. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the name Anthropocene? Second, what response do you have to Haraway's proposed Chthulucene? And, finally, do you see

H. P. Lovecraft as a fundamental literary figure for helping us apprehend and imagine this phase of ecological horror?

B.E. While other names, such as the Chthulucene or the Thanatocene rightfully indicate the definitely uncanny, monstrous and very deadly aspects of the new geological era, I think the Anthropocene is a useful name too. It clearly signals the cause and core of the global changes, i.e. humans and human activity, which sets the era apart from others.

The biggest weakness of the name "the Anthropocene" is, as Haraway mentions in her excellent essay, that it puts the focus on humans and human civilization, and as such, conceptually isolates the era, making us forget its effect on other organisms than ourselves. As Haraway mentions in her essay, we share the planet not only with other vertebrates, that resemble us more or less, or even eukaryotes, beings with the same types of cells as ours, but also with organisms that have a much different biological make-up, such as the giant fungal colonies that are the world's largest living organisms, and the hundreds of species of prokaryotic bacteria that inhabit our guts.

Modern civilization compartmentalizes the world into human-made and everything else, distancing us from nature. This makes it too easy to believe that human life and activities do not depend on the natural world and global systems. This erroneous belief, this delusion, is maybe one of the reasons why the effect of human activity has reached levels that are as disastrous as an asteroid impact for the other living beings on the planet.

But perhaps the worst effect of naming a whole geological era after humans is that it creates a difficulty in seeing past the Anthropocene, of realizing that some day it will end, with or without the human species itself, and give way to other geological eras. I suspect it is very difficult for humans, and especially human decision makers, to envision that such eras will arise on the planet in the near or distant future.

Regarding Lovecraft, despite all the problematic aspects of his work, there is no doubt that he is a master of the monstrous, the uncanny and perhaps of modernity itself. He lived in a time that is not so different from ours, with large cultural and

political changes, and wars and conflicts looming on the international scene. It is therefore very appropriate that he captured the deep fears and anxieties of his personal life as well as the times. I've always thought a story such as "The Colour out of Space," although predating nuclear power, describes the invisible toxicity and pervasive fear that radiation creates when it is leaked.

It is no coincidence that most of Lovecraft's monsters are created out of nature, or are ancient and chaotic aspects of nature. Apart from being fears of untamed parts of one's own psyche, perhaps these monsters also speak to modernity's doubt that it has successfully conquered the natural world, and to a lingering fear that nature will some day rise up against civilization.

A.H. Since we're in the realm of the literary weird, the literary uncanny, what do you think Norwegian mythologies and folktales might have to offer literature in our ecological phase? I recently read your story on a *draug*, "The Draug of the Deep," and I wonder what sort of connections you'd make there. Relatedly, I live in a small town originally founded by Norwegian immigrants to the United States, so we have a substantial museum about Norwegian immigrant experiences here and we have many houses around town, including my own, that feature *nisse* in windows.[4] The film *Troll Hunter* also comes to mind, but I'd like to hear about your perspective on what you've done and what might yet be done—all with the caveat that our use of "weird" here should not be understood as a move of cultural disparagement or disrespect.

B.E. *The Troll Hunter* is such a fun movie and shows the weird and dangerous aspects of Scandinavian folk tales and culture very well. The movie displays how trolls have traditionally been described and tricked, and manages to put that into a narrative that is modern and humorous, with elements of conspiracy theory and government cover-up. The movie really is a modern-day folk tale.

Trolls are giant and destructive supernatural beings in traditional Scandinavian folk tales, while the nisse are the "little people" that live around the farms and in

[4] A *draug* is an undead creature from Norse mythology. A *nisse* is a very small creature from Scandinavian mythology, often associated with winter solstice and later with Christmas; they appear similar to common garden gnomes.

stables and barns, and can be helpful if they are treated well, or mischievous if they are mistreated. I suspect that even today, in some places of Norway, a bowl of sour cream porridge and a slice of cured meat is still placed outside or in the barn at Christmas Eve for the local nisse. No one really believes in them anymore, but they have become a tradition and part of the winter coziness and are ubiquitous as Christmas decorations.

There are darker and weirder supernatural beings in Scandinavian folk tales, and unsurprisingly, most of them are inspired by nature or natural phenomena. Shape-shifting bears and ravens, forest-sirens and undead mariners are common. Norwegian folk tales are more similar to those of the German Brothers Grimm than of Danish Hans Christian Andersen's romantic fairy tales, even though he was inspired by folklore.

Folk tales indicate a fear of nature and natural phenomena, such as getting lost in the woods, drowning in ponds, or sinking in the sea, and were cautionary tales. But sometimes, by working with nature or respecting it, one could trick the troll or cancel the shape-shifter curse and get out of troubles. For modern times, I think folk tales can give a sense of awareness about nature and how the old culture viewed and respected the forces of nature. It's perhaps telling that many folk tales, especially those from Northern Norway where nature is harshest, do not end well, even with the protagonist being knowledgeable, quick-thinking and "pure of heart."

A.H. I really appreciate the insights of that response. Last summer I took my daughter to Iceland and we talked to several different people about the local lore of the "hidden folk".[5] What was fascinating was how people would tell us some of the stories of their home region or home farm, but instead of playing up the mystical and magical elements, they wanted us to recognize how these stories were repeated to engage children in order to teach valuable lessons about how to keep safe in the world outside home as youngsters were often unsupervised as their parents had very

[5] "Hidden Folk" or Huldufólk encompass a range of mythical creatures in Icelandic culture. For a very fine introduction, see Alda Sigmundsdóttir's *The Little Book of the Hidden People*, Enska Textasmidjan Press, 2015.

hard working lives. In that sense it seems to me, as an interested outsider, that some Nordic fairy tale figures embody a dynamic of the uncanniness of the world in which we coexist with others and pragmatic practices for coexistence.

The presence of old folk tales and traditions seems to be stronger in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries. Maybe because the Icelanders are a small population on a remote island in one of the roughest climates in the world. In Norway, and in Denmark, Sweden and Finland too, many of the old myths live on in children's books and rhymes and tales. And some have even made it into popular culture and been mixed with modern elements, like Andersen's fairy tales, the Moomin books and the beautiful historical fantasy novels of Finnish-Swedish author Irmelin Sandman Lilius.

Now to take this place-based line of discussion in a slightly different direction, the Anthropocene, like global warming, is planetary; it universalizes not only all human beings but, really, the whole biophysical material of Earth. Yet, the impacts are distributed very differently. To that end, what particularities of place or places shape your ecologically-engaged literature? And you might talk about your conscious and controlled invocations of place during the writing process as well as unconscious elements of place that you may have noticed upon reflection and/or through the responses of others reading your work.

B.E. First of all, I'd like to say that I completely agree on this view of the Anthropocene and global warming. All of my writings, not just *Not Dark Yet*, but most of my short stories, and definitely my essays, have a very strong connection to place. And not just place, but also landscape and biota, the flora and fauna of the area described. I'm not just interested in describing the human activities and civilization of a particular place, but also its natural context. I always do this when I travel as well. I love seeing new places, new cultures, people, architecture, surroundings. In particular, in new landscapes I make a note of the plants and animals, even if it's a town or a city. This might be the biologist talking, or perhaps this habit is the reason why I chose to study biology.

Travels to completely uninhabited and undomesticated parts of the high Arctic have been very inspiring. These barren, exposed and almost extraterrestrial landscapes clearly show what the world looked like before the Anthropocene, before

there was anything that resembled human beings. But maybe more importantly, they also show what parts of the world might look like after the Anthropocene. At least, for me, these places indicate a before and after, something I hadn't managed to envision on my own, and which I think is very difficult for humans in general to do. I've tried to capture some of this notion in my follow-up to *Not Dark Yet*.

A.H. Wow, that's a fascinating way to think about connection to place in the high Arctic! I feel like this opens up a new avenue of geological aesthetics different from the Arctic and Antarctic imaginaries that come out of Lovecraft, as well as Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Kim Stanley Robinson's writings. I'd love to hear about a particular encounter and how it translated into part of a story—perhaps past or something you're working on right now.

B.E. Thanks so much! I don't think many people, not even writers, can imagine or want to imagine, an Earth without humans. I think for writers of a certain age, such as Mary Shelley, even though they lived under harsher conditions than we do today, imagining a world before or after humans might have seemed blasphemous or impossible to them. Perhaps thinking about life after humans is only possible in a modernity after Darwin and Nietzsche. Or maybe such a thought was too pressing for someone like Lovecraft, and that's why he wrote what he did.

On my trip we were very comfortable and had a sense that the animals came to watch us instead of only the other way around. A beluga with a calf appeared near the ship and I had the feeling she was showing the calf the ship and the odd sounds and creatures onboard. One polar bear was a little curious and hid in the fog, but stayed near, to see if anyone would wander off in the wrong direction, which fortunately didn't happen. Other animals, such as a colony of Brünnich's guillemots at a bird mountain, just ignored us and went on with their lives.

So far these encounters have resulted in a story and some essays, but only one of them has been published so far—the essay "Going Back to the Arctic" that appears in *Up Here: The North at the Center of the World* (2016), edited by Julie Decker and Kirsten J. Anderson. I'm currently in the middle of writing a novel that is set on a ship in the polar regions, and hopefully that will find a publisher and an audience.

A.H. The birds of literature seem to function as canaries in the coal mine, to borrow an ecologically intriguing phrase. In your novel, *Not Dark Yet*, there's a deeply disturbing sequence about research with owls, including a catastrophic interaction that frankly has been the fodder of a couple of nightmares for me. Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) features uncanny owl elements too. And beyond the work of you both, owls in particular, but also birds of many feathers, permeate weird or speculative fiction that engages with ecology and the Anthropocene.[6] Would you please talk us through some of the different work birds do for you, perhaps inside your literature and out? And are there any especially meaningful birds in literature of the Anthropocene that you've read? Which ones and why?

B.E. To me, the owl has always been a cultural signifier more than a biological one, even though I live in a country where owls are fairly common and I grew up with a stuffed owl I never thought of as creepy. I've always associated the owl with the image of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, knowledge and strategy (the more intellectual parts of warfare) but also certain crafts. The owl, with its calm, patient demeanor, large eyes, and quiet approach, became a symbol of Athena. And I think in Western culture, this association has lasted, and the owl remains a symbol of wisdom. In the age of the Internet meme, owls are maybe simply animals with very large and cute eyes, hence the horrible owl cafes in Tokyo.

But in almost all other cultures I've read about, the owl is a bird of darkness, often a harbinger of bad omens, or a *psychopomp* leading people to the land of death. I guess in that sense it's appropriate for a goddess of war to have the owl as her symbol.

The owl scene in *Not Dark Yet* came about from a true story I heard about an owl researcher who had been attacked by one of her birds. She managed to get the owl to let go of her head, but said that she didn't know why it attacked or even why it let her go. I've heard similar stories from researchers working with big cats as well.

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[6] Consider the various birds and bird-analogues in several of China Mievielle's novels and in Johanna Sinisalo's novel *Birdbrain* (2008), for example.

Working with large predators has a certain amount of risk. Even animals that are very much used to humans or born in captivity can get frightened or irritated and attack.

The scene with the owl in *Acceptance* is one of my favorites in the Southern Reach trilogy. I wonder if the owl there represents the wisdom of the biologist's husband, or the love that remains between them.

I think that since (some) birds can fly and cross long distances, humans have always been fascinated by birds and their apparent freedom to move about in ways we can only do with difficulty. Birds being present in large flocks may also seem scary or threatening, and result in works such as Hitchcock's *The Birds*, which could almost be seen as eco-horror.

A.H. There's so much in that response. Yes, I teach Hitchcock's *The Birds* in an EcoMedia course for college undergraduates, and students typically respond to it very differently than to other more explicitly ecologically-geared films. They find disturbing both the idea that we don't, and perhaps can't, know why the birds attack and the end of the film, which offers no clear sense of the future, but I think this uncertainty/ambiguity (?) is a key component of how we use stories to shape ecological thought and aesthetics. I also show them select clips of that so-bad-it's-good film *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*. Somewhat counterintuitively, that film, with its overtly if absurdly environmentalist elements, helps underscore the unknown elements of Hitchcock's. And, since our conversation keeps engaging weird fiction and I know we're both *Twin Peaks* fans, how about one more thought by way of the owl on that series? After all, we'll soon see its continuation, and the original appeared at a time when loggers in the Pacific Northwest were losing jobs and the very industry to rising environmental concerns, embodied in the icon of the owl; furthermore, the mythological core of *Twin Peaks* speaks to colonization, displacement and development—with the hopes in Season One of getting Norwegian investors to develop the area into high-end real estate.

B.E. It's great to hear you are using *The Birds* in your classes, as I think it is so different from other work that may be tied to the subject. I think swarms of any kind, birds or fish or insect, seem very alien to our culture, because we emphasize individuality

so much. Or maybe because large groups of humans can seem frightening, and mob mentality can quickly turn to violence.

I had forgotten about the owl in *Twin Peaks*. It's years since I saw the series, but I remember being very fascinated by it. The owl, as I remember it, is definitely a *psychopomp* and a symbol of dark, unknown forces. Wasn't it strongly tied to the serial killer as well?

I also forgot about the Norwegian investors, but I remember that they spoke intelligible Norwegian and that the series was really popular here, mostly because no one had seen anything similar before, the dark humor and scary horror and weird happenings, but also because the setting of a small town in a woodland area seemed very familiar.

A.H. Having already veered here into television, I'm curious whether you watched the series *Okkupert*? Its edgy combination of energy futures and geopolitics feels deeply if terrifyingly appropriate as a storytelling mode for today. Perhaps you have other series, from home or abroad, that you see as shaping our stories as we take up an understanding of our life in the Anthropocene.

B.E. I've seen the first two episodes of *Okkupert*. The series received a lot of attention here in Norway because of the geopolitical plot. The idea that a close and historical ally might some day become an enemy is a worst nightmare come true, and it's very interesting because of that. Of course, the current challenges in Europe show that sudden geopolitical changes are possible, even in peace time. This will perhaps be the prominent characteristic of the Anthropocene, that not only the climate, but life in formerly stable regions of the world, may change quickly.

A.H. One of the fascinating points of tension in *Not Dark Yet* is that of attempting to modify life to face the changing conditions of global warming individually or in social units. It would be fascinating to hear you talk about the cluster of people trying to establish their farms in mountainous areas not previously used as arable land, as well as Brandon's intersection with them as an individual seeking something. Additionally, how do you see your own cultural and individual background shaping

your literary explorations of how we might reconfigure ourselves for Anthropocene resilience?

B.E. I've seen writings about the Anthropocene say that with a changing climate, animals must either try to adapt to the new conditions or flee to a place with a similar environment. Other writers claim that environmental organizations and government programs and business initiatives are just green-washing the same processes that led to climate change in the first place.

There will probably always be adaptable and inventive people who will try to capitalize on a changing environment. Already, some people are starting to grow wine grapes here in Norway, and I've read that farmers are trying new crops in Alaska because of the higher temperatures. In other parts of the world people will have to adapt in other ways to the changing climate, whether they want to or not. But I guess there will always be some entrepreneurial individuals who will try and earn money on it, one way or another. Perhaps the biggest concern will be groups or nations that will try to capitalize on the geopolitical destabilization that increased climate change will bring.

In *Not Dark Yet* Brandon is pulled towards the group of farmers because their reaction to the changing climate is the opposite to that of Kaye and his group, who resist the change. The farmers also represent a kind of hope that maybe things won't turn out so bad after all, and that there's a silver living in even damaging anthropogenic environmental changes.

I'm part of the culture that has created anthropogenic climate change and I will admit I have trouble seeing how we can get past it or live in a more balanced relationship with the planet and at the same time maintain a large population of humans.

Biologist E.O. Wilson's idea of a Half-Earth, with about half the planet's total land area set aside for wildlife, and the rest to humans, is the best solution that I've seen. Others have suggested leaving large tracts of the oceans, especially the pelagic areas, as protected regions. Only then can fish populations, including those important for human consumption, spring back.

But plans like that would require a huge effort from all the nations on Earth, and sadly I don't think the will to go to such a length is there. For example, here in Norway we can't even keep a population of a few hundred wolves in the wild because they clash with human agriculture. It's the same all over the planet. Humans are now so many that our activities turn land and sea into islands of animal habitats that are continuously shrinking. This is why we're losing so many species a day. And it is just one of the many effects the Anthropocene has on the beings we share the planet with.

Despite certain inventive people's ideas and grand visions of 'Option Two,' finding a planet similar to Earth and going to live there, is really a pseudo-option and an illusion, at least for a long time yet. To date, no one has managed to create a completely self-sustaining artificial environment where humans can survive. With our technology you'd think that was easy, throw in some plants and some water and soil, but it's not. So far, the only self-sustaining environment where humans can live is the natural environment on Earth.

A.H. To dovetail with the several remarks you make specific to the context of Norway, I wonder if you have thoughts on how Norway specifically, and perhaps Scandinavia more broadly, seem to operate in the social imaginaries outside of that nation/region? In part, I'm thinking of the Svalbard Seed Vault as an object of attention globally and I know you have experiences in Svalbard that you could put in direct conversation with what you see others imagining or projecting onto that area and vault.

B.E. For those who are not familiar with Svalbard, it's a small archipelago high in the Arctic, midway between the northern coast of Norway and the North Pole. It's the location of one of the world's northernmost towns, Longyearbyen, which used to be a coal mining town, but today is a center for research and has many scientists and students, and a lot of tourists. The Global Seed Vault is a seed bank in which every country in the world can deposit seeds for when they need to replenish their stock.

The Arctic is one of the places where climate change and global warming is happening the fastest. The changes have been really noticeable, even just over the span

of a decade. A few years ago I interviewed a senior scientist about sea ice. He thought we'd see an ice-free Arctic in the summer of 2050. But already now there is so little sea ice that both the Northwest Passage and the Northeast Passage were open for a short while this summer.

With higher temperatures in the Arctic come human dreams of greater activity, extraction of resources, and, of course, profit. But so far it's turned out to be difficult. As far as I know, the Russian and the Western attempts at getting drilling rigs to work and be profitable in the Barents Sea have so far failed. The conditions are too harsh and the oil prices too low to make it profitable.

The Arctic tends to give uncomfortable surprises. In Svalbard the stories of business owners and investors, from Victorian times until now, who tried to dig for gold, marble, and other resources, and failed to make a profit because of the difficult conditions or the extreme price of getting equipment to the high Arctic, are numerous. Just about the only resource it has been possible until now to extract has been coal, and that is winding down, giving way to tourism and research.

The increasing temperatures also change the conditions for those who have managed to live in the Arctic for a long time. This summer saw an outbreak of an ancient anthrax bacterium from cadavers that had melted in the permafrost in the Russian Arctic. And even more unsettling are the methane stores in the tundra and in the seabed. These are slowly heating and thus releasing methane, one of the strongest greenhouse gases, which could accelerate global warming to very dangerous speeds.

The Arctic is getting a lot of attention right now, and more and more people are visiting the region or want to go there, for various reasons. Interestingly enough, that coincides with animal migrations caused by climate change and the sixth extinction. Many plant and animal species are slowly moving towards the North.

When it comes to social imaginaries of Norway and Scandinavia, it's hard to see them when you live and have lived all your life inside them. I did read a recent article where the writer thought that the primary success of the Scandinavian model was not its socialism, but instead its high degree of social cohesion, societal trust, work ethic and cultural unity. Since the Scandinavian model has been shown to encourage

economic competition and innovation, unlike other and more economically socialist models, maybe there is something in that view.

When I started to write I didn't think my writing was typically Norwegian or Scandinavian. But the more I write, the more I see that the Norwegian and Scandinavian landscapes and climate and flora and fauna influence my writing a lot, even though they may not be direct themes of the writing. And I'm sure Norwegian attitudes and traditions and literature and art factor into my writing, even without my conscious awareness of them doing so.

A.H. Your placed perspective is a keen reminder just how granular are the ways in which organic and inorganic neighbors act upon us, and we upon them, recursively! While I'm hesitant to bend the conversation away from Scandinavia, we are wrapping up this conversation in the wake of the recent USA election and I wonder if you've got thoughts to share on new or renewed roles for literature in the age of Trump—the age of climate change denial resurging in America?

B.E. Right now it's hard to say how much or how little the Trump administration will be able to reduce programs on climate research and climate change. But sceptics of climate change might now become louder and stronger. Maybe it will become harder to reach and convince those who are in doubt or those who want to do something but are not sure what.

With any kind of idea there will always be a part of the population that will retain the idea, even if it's debunked or abandoned by the rest of the world. For example, there are still people, although very few, who think the Earth is flat and that gravity is some kind of hoax. Still, it might be difficult to keep convincing oneself that the planet is getting colder (one of the climate sceptics' arguments) as both winters and summers become noticeably warmer and warmer all over the world. I think, as climate change becomes more pronounced, that we will see the changing climate reflected to a stronger degree in literature, and culture in general.

A.H. As a final question in our conversation, would you talk more about your current novel in progress, including how your planned journey to Antarctica fits into that literary work?

B.E. I'm currently at the end of the first draft of a new novel, which I will be working on while the follow-up to *Not Dark Yet* is in slush. After three connected novels I wanted to try something new, and thus the new novel is a literary crime novel. I've always been a fan of cozy crime novels such as those by Valerie Wolzien and Simon Brett, even though of course, murder is never cozy. In my teens I read almost all of Agatha Christie's novels, and every summer, the British cozy crime series *Midsomer Murders* is aired in Norway. That series has been going for 18 years and I've watched every episode at least once. I love the series because of its beautiful setting in the English countryside, which is one of my favorite landscapes, but also because of its charming detectives and somewhat silly plot.

But a crime novel can't be all cozy, so I'm doing my own twist on the coziness. One of them is the setting, which is a passenger ship in the Antarctic. I went on a similar ship around Spitsbergen in 2015, and people who go on trips like that tend to have well-defined personalities as well as an interest in the polar regions.

I plan to go to Antarctica myself next winter. It is then summer in the Southern hemisphere and much of the water along the Antarctic Peninsula will be open. Tourist ships have visited the region for more than a decade, and the trips are becoming more and more popular. Going to the Antarctic continent itself, and definitely the interior and the research bases, is something entirely different. But so far only scientists, technicians, and millionaires can go to the continent itself, so I'm very happy to have a chance to see the Antarctic Peninsula.

Even on a tourist voyage along well-established routes, it will still take two days by plane and two days at sea to get there. I expect this will make it really noticeable that Antarctica is the world's most isolated and remote continent. Along the peninsula there is a lot of wildlife, several species of penguin, seal, whale, albatross and other birds, as well as icebergs and ice floes and glaciers of various size. Every picture I have seen from there has been fantastic, so I suspect the Antarctic Peninsula will be a memory for life, no matter the weather or the number of penguins we will see.

A.H. Berit, it's been a pleasure talking with you! Thank you for putting forward a lot of insights as a writer, a reader and a viewer. All best wishes for your writing and the

trip to Antarctica. I'm looking forward to reading how the Antarctic shapes and gets reshaped as you entangle it with literary murder and mystery.

B.E. It's been a great pleasure speaking with you too! I'm sure the voyage will affect the novel and my writing in many unexpected ways that I can't imagine now. Antarctica is a more typical setting for horror stories or thrillers than cozy crimes, but many of Agatha Christie's novels are set in remote locations that back then took a long time to reach and were difficult to go to. In that sense a tourist voyage along the Antarctic Peninsula seems like an appropriate setting for a modern-day cozy crime. Thank you so much for your very fun and interesting questions and keen interest in Scandinavian culture, both traditional and popular.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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