

READING GUIDE: *FARTHEST NORTH*

This guide has been produced to mark the International Polar Year, 2007-2008.

Publication information

Farthest North: The Incredible Three-Year Voyage to the Frozen Latitudes of the North (Norwegian Title: *Fram over Polhavet. Den norske polarfærd, 1893-1896*. First published in 1897.)

Author: Fridtjof Nansen with an introduction by Roland Huntford

Publisher: Random House (1999) - Part of the Modern Library Exploration Series (Jon Krakauer - Series Editor)

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INTRODUCTION

This classic, first-hand account of polar exploration was a bestseller when it appeared in 1897, and it continues to hold widespread appeal today as evidenced by its inclusion in Random House's Modern Library Exploration Series. *Farthest North* recounts Fridtjof Nansen's harrowing and historic attempt to reach the North Pole with the ship *Fram* and a crew of twelve. Though Nansen did not reach the North Pole, he and a companion-Hjalmar Johansen—traveled farther north than any Westerner before. This work outlines Nansen's leadership skills, the scientific accomplishments of the 1893-96 expedition, and its physical and mental challenges. Using liberal amounts of humor and drawing, at times, on the literary style of the Icelandic sagas, Nansen produces an intense and suspenseful work which places his accomplishments, and those of his crew, in a historical and national context.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Nansen's account can be divided into two main sections. The first part describes, in some detail, Nansen's rationale and motivation for undertaking the *Fram* expedition—including scientific theories he hopes to prove—the construction and building of the *Fram* under the direction of Colin Archer, preparations for the journey, and the *Fram*'s departure from Norway. *Fram* was designed to withstand being crushed by ice, and this section recounts *Fram*'s freezing into the Arctic ice and its gradual drift with the sea ice, as well as Nansen's gradual realization that the ship will not drift over the North Pole as projected.

The second part focuses on Nansen and Johansen's attempt to reach the North Pole with dogs and sledges. Leaving the *Fram* behind under the command of Otto Sverdrup, they make a run for the pole, and decide to turn south after reaching 86° 14' N. Facing extremely difficult and life threatening situations while on the ever changing sea ice—including numerous encounters with polar bears and walruses and the killing of sled dogs in order to survive—Nansen and Johansen make their way to land and establish a winter camp in the Franz Josef Land archipelago. Fifteen months after leaving the *Fram*, they meet up with the English explorer Frederick Jackson. Nansen and Johansen make a triumphant return to Norway in 1896, around the same time that the *Fram* returns safely with the rest of the expedition members.

An appendix containing Captain Otto Sverdrup's account of the drifting of the *Fram* after

Nansen and Johansen's departure is included in this edition of Nansen's work, as well as a concise conclusion in which Nansen summarizes the scientific and other accomplishments of the expedition. He also outlines the work that remains to be done.

Demonstrations of the virtue and value of patience and perseverance in planning and preparing for and carrying out polar expeditions run like a litany throughout this narrative. Poetic passages, mythological and literary references, and Nansen's effective use of humor, understatement and personification, reveal his prowess not only as a scientist and explorer, but also as a writer for the general public.

FOR DISCUSSION

Farthest North is known as one of the great classic narratives of polar exploration. Provide a definition of "exploration narrative" and discuss why this work is classified as such. Which exploration narratives have you heard of or read?

Examine the overriding structure of *Farthest North*, paying close attention to the beginning and the end. In what ways is it cyclical? Is there a marked difference between part one and part two? If so, try to account for this difference. Which themes are repeated time and again in the work?

How would you characterize Nansen's organization of time-past, present and future? What function do the flashbacks have?

Discuss Nansen's use of mythological and fairytale references.

What type of picture does Nansen paint of himself? How does he portray himself as a leader, visionary, explorer, adventurer, scientist, father, and husband? How does this narrative contribute to Nansen's image as a national hero?

How does Nansen invite the reader to be his confidant?

Discuss the significant others that inhabit this narrative. Do we hear their voices directly or indirectly? How do the ship *Fram* (keep in mind this is the original title of Nansen's book), the ice and the dogs figure into Nansen's cast of characters? How does Nansen personify the ship and the ice? Is the ice described as a predominantly benevolent or menacing force?

What type of tone does Nansen employ in his account? How and why does he use humor to tell his story? You may wish to draw in Nansen's use of understatement in your discussion.

Are there silences in the narrative? Are there events, people or periods of time that appear to be neglected or overlooked? Keep in mind that silences and omissions can be just as revealing as detailed descriptions.

What did you learn about Norwegian holidays and/or history from *Farthest North*?

Discuss the insights you have gained on the Arctic and polar exploration while reading this

account.

What did you find personally useful, inspiring or interesting in Nansen's narrative? Cite two passages which you found to be particularly profound or poetic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was voted the most influential Norwegian of the twentieth century in a reader poll conducted by the major Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* in 2000. A Renaissance man, Nansen wore many hats, including those of polar explorer, author, scientist, statesman, and humanitarian. He initially caught the imagination of the public after leading the first expedition across Greenland by skis in 1888, and this expedition – combining exploration, adventure and science – provided him with valuable experience for his groundbreaking journey with the *Fram* five years later. Nansen's biographer Roland Huntford calls him "the father of modern polar exploration." In 1922 Nansen received the Nobel Peace Prize for his extensive humanitarian work with refugees and prisoners of war after the First World War. Oslo contains several Nansen related sites including the Fram Museum. This museum, located on the Bygdøy Peninsula, houses the Fram, and visitors can walk both above and below deck on the ship.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR/TRANSLATION

This Modern Library edition of Nansen's work is abridged. The first English translation of Nansen's account *Fram over Polhavet* appeared shortly after its original publication in Norwegian. *Farthest North* is soon to be reissued in an unabridged English translation called *Farthest North: The Epic Adventure of a Visionary Explorer*. (List price 17.95.) Further details will appear on this web site as they become available.

OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY THIS AUTHOR

The First Crossing of Greenland. Translated by Hubert Majendie Gepp. Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2002.

Eskimo Life. Translated by William Archer. Elibron Classics Series, 2005.

Additional titles of works by and about Fridtjof Nansen can be found at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laueates/1922

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