

INGIBJÖRG ÁGÚSTSDÓTTIR
HÁSKÓLA ÍSLANDS

From Colonialism to Climate Crisis: Polar Bears in the Fiction of James Hogg, Helen McClory and Vicki Jarrett

Introduction¹

The rapid melting of Arctic ice starkly illustrates the alarming consequences of anthropogenic climate change. According to estimates, if greenhouse gas emissions continue at the current rate, the Arctic could be ice-free in the summer as early as 2040.² The polar bear, often featured in news images on melting ice and the climate crisis, is one of the Arctic's most iconic inhabitants. This large and formidable predator, renowned for its ability to endure harsh temperatures and navigate the icy landscape, has rightfully earned the title of the "Arctic's monarch."³ Bears in general are seen as "iconic animals" and symbols of the non-human world⁴ and over the past eight thousand years, humans have had complex views of and relationships with polar bears, as outlined by Michael Engelhard:

we have regarded [the polar bear] as food, toy, pet, trophy, status symbol, commodity, man-eating monster, spirit familiar, circus act, zoo superstar,

1 The author would like to thank the University of Iceland Research Fund for financial support. Thanks are also extended to peer reviewers for invaluable feedback and suggestions.

2 Hancock, "Six ways loss of Arctic ice," n.p.

3 Archibald, "From Fierce to Adorable," 269.

4 Nevin, Davis, Kitchen and Clapham, "What is a Bear?", 1.

and political cause célèbre. We have feared, venerated, locked up, coveted, butchered, sold, pitied, and emulated this large carnivore. It has left few emotions unstirred. Where the bears' negative image prevailed, as so often, a perceived competition for resources or a threat to our dominion were the cause.⁵

This multifaceted relationship is reflected in literature, where polar bears often symbolise broader cultural and environmental themes. This article explores the representation of polar bears in Scottish fiction on the Arctic, a topic that has been overlooked in Scottish literary studies. For background on the polar bear and what it stands for in the different historical contexts of the Scottish texts analysed here, the article first discusses the contrasting perspectives of colonial and Indigenous cultures towards the animal. European explorers often saw the Arctic as hostile and uncharted, while Indigenous peoples, with their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), have long understood the Arctic environment and the integral role of polar bears to Arctic communities' culture and survival. Unlike colonial narratives that depicted polar bears as mere trophies or threats, Inuit legends often portray them as spiritual guides and symbols of resilience. Further, the article outlines how the polar bear has become an icon of climate change, frequently depicted in precarious situations, reflecting the urgent need to address the environmental crisis. The article engages with scholars such as Dorothea Born and Saffron O'Neill, who highlight the symbolic role of polar bears as indicators of environmental degradation.⁶ It examines how the chosen Scottish literary works reflect changing attitudes towards the Arctic and underscore the polar bear's symbolic significance in both colonial and environmental contexts. The discussion focuses on James Hogg's novella *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon* (1837), Helen McClory's micro-story "The Companion" (2018), and Vicki Jarrett's speculative sci-fi/cli-fi novel *Always North* (2019).⁷

5 Engelhard, *Ice Bear*, 7.

6 Born, "Bearing Witness", O'Neill, "Defining a visual metonym."

7 These texts have been selected due to their central focus on polar bears and because they highlight the contrasting perspectives of the early nineteenth-century and the early twenty-first century to the Arctic. There are various other Scottish literary works that feature polar bears, such as some of Gordon Stables' Arctic adventure stories published in the late nineteenth and early

Despite their differences and the gap in time between the writing of the first and the latter two, these works feature polar bears as ‘companion’ figures and incorporate folkloristic elements, emphasising similarities between polar bears and humans and exploring ideas of polar bears crossing worlds and acting as guiding spirits to humans.⁸ In the twenty-first century texts, polar bears function as spectral beings, representing an environmental haunting reflective of the climate crisis. Together, these works provide snapshots of two distinct stages in the European relationship with the Arctic: the days of British exploration and imperialism, and contemporary reflections on climate change.

Colonialism, polar bears and Arctic mythmaking

Graham Huggan and Robert Norum describe the Arctic’s history as “one of subjection” to both imperial rule and localised colonialism, noting that this subjection continues through the manipulation of the Arctic for Western knowledge and resource extraction.⁹ Nanna Kaalund supports this view, explaining that “Ownership, right to resources, and potential trading routes were main motivators [... for] many Arctic expeditions.”¹⁰ Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European and American explorers treated the Arctic as “an empty imperial frontier” ripe for exploitation.¹¹ These colonialist attitudes, combined with capitalism and industrialisation, led to decades of unregulated extraction, disregarding the environmental consequences that now contribute

twentieth centuries, where polar bears function as one manifestation of many challenges of survival in the Arctic. The animal also features in numerous travel accounts and journals, such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s journal that was written during his time working as a ship surgeon onboard a Greenland whaler in 1880. In the twenty-first century there have been some poetic engagements with polar bears, e.g. in poetry by Gordon Meade. A more comprehensive study of polar bears in Scottish literature would of course only be viable in a longer piece of writing; the author hopes that this article helps open new channels into further studies focusing on the portrayal of the polar bear in Scottish writing.

8 See a discussion of such folkloristic elements in e.g. Henderson, “Bear Tales,” 252–3.

9 Huggan and Norum, “Editorial,” 3 and 4.

10 Kaalund, *Explorations in the Icy North*, 10.

11 Bloom, *Climate Change*, 6.

significantly to the climate crisis.¹² Echoing Huggan’s argument that today’s ecological crises are linked to historical legacies of imperial exploitation and authoritarian oppression,¹³ Justyna Poray-Wybranowska argues that “catastrophe is linked to a long history of exploitation of the land that accelerated under British colonialism.”¹⁴ Indigenous scholar Kyle Powys Whyte outlines how such colonial invasions and resulting environmental changes rapidly disrupted the lives of many Indigenous communities.¹⁵ Thus, Arctic exploration and colonisation together comprise narratives of greed, exploitation, injustice and mismanagement, all contributing to the current global climate disruption. European explorers’ attitudes towards polar bears were emblematic of these exploitative attitudes. Initially, they may have been “ill at ease with the Arctic” and saw the polar bear as representing “the implacable indifference of an inhospitable landscape.”¹⁶ However, the animal was part of a landscape they aimed to subjugate, map and control. Hence, capturing or killing a polar bear became a test of imperial and masculine mettle.

In her 1993 book *Gender on Ice*, Lisa Bloom states that “Ideologies of gender were central to polar ‘discovery,’” with polar exploration narratives defining “the social construction of masculinity,” portraying desolate and freezing regions as mythic sites for men to prove themselves as “heroes capable of superhuman feats.”¹⁷ Francis Spufford echoes this, describing polar exploration as “a special kind of male travel.”¹⁸ In Britain, male explorers were seen as heroic warriors battling harsh and inhospitable northern conditions, while women and children waited at home.¹⁹ These accounts highlighted the explorers’ survival, showcasing British resilience, ingenuity, and strength.²⁰ Arctic exploration was tied to British

12 Bloom, *Climate Change*, 2; Hartnett, “Climate Imperialism,” 139.

13 Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialism,” 702.

14 Poray-Wybranowska, *Climate Change*, 34.

15 Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies,” 154.

16 Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 113.

17 Bloom, *Gender on Ice*, 6.

18 Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, 106.

19 David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination*, 109–110.

20 Hill, *White Horizon*, 6.

empire-building, with Arctic adventures renewing imperial ideals, so that polar leaders quickly became “dream” figures, national symbols of achievement and personal enterprise, as Huw Lewis-Jones posits.²¹ Furthermore, the feminisation of the Arctic, seen as a space to be traversed, mapped and mastered by a masculine force, is common in exploration discourse, as Heidi Hansson shows.²² The polar bear was a fixed part of this landscape, haunting the frozen and forbidding Arctic in the popular mind, as Fee explains.²³ Also, by “emphasizing or exaggerating the strength and guile of polar bears, explorers implicitly commended their own bravery.”²⁴ Thus, in Arctic exploration mythmaking, as a “placeholder for Arctic adversity,” the polar bear embodied the glory and fame sought by many explorers.²⁵ Fighting and killing the animal, telling the tale and bringing back trophies, greatly enhanced their heroic and masculine reputation. The polar bear therefore played a crucial role in European narratives of exploration and domination, its image manipulated to fit the colonial agenda and serving as a testament to human conquest over nature.

Indigenous perspectives and knowledge concerning the polar bear

In contrast to colonial perspectives, Indigenous peoples have long understood the Arctic environment and its inhabitants. The polar bear has been integral to the culture and survival of Arctic Indigenous peoples for millennia, viewed not just as a resource but as a crucial part of their ecosystem and cultural practices.²⁶ This knowledge, passed down through generations, is deeply embedded in their oral traditions and daily lives.²⁷ Inuit and Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) offers valuable insights, increas-

21 Lewis-Jones, *Imagining the Arctic*, 341.

22 Hansson, “Henrietta Kent and the Feminised North,” 78–79.

23 Fee, *Polar Bear*, 86.

24 Engelhard, *Ice Bear*, 66. This tendency is also pointed out in Fee, *Polar Bear*, 143.

25 Engelhard, *Ice Bear*, 80.

26 Wong and Murphy, “Inuit Methods of Identifying Polar Bear Characteristics,” 406–417.

27 Wong et al, “Inuit Perspectives of Polar Bear Research,” 260.

ingly valued by environmental scientists, policy makers and managers, especially for understanding local changes due to global environmental shifts. Efforts to integrate TEK into management and policy decisions, particularly those affecting Indigenous communities, are growing.²⁸ Successful collaborations, like those highlighted by Ian Stirling,²⁹ demonstrate the effectiveness of combining traditional knowledge with scientific research. These efforts are crucial for developing comprehensive strategies to address the climate crisis.

Bernard Saladin D'Anglure explains that in Inuit myths, polar bears are present “in the depths of the ocean as well as in the heavens, in all the realms of sea, land and air, in association with life and the powers of the greatest spirits as well as the weakest of humans (the orphans).”³⁰ Stéphanie Vaudry states that polar bears feature in Inuit art as powerful creatures that are feared,³¹ and that Inuktitut legends abound with polar bears and other animals, with frequent transformations between animals and humans.³² Many traditional Indigenous stories and teachings, passed down through generations, express deep gratitude for the land and animals, including polar bears, that have sacrificed themselves for the Inuit people's survival.³³ Additionally, Inuit folklore includes stories of shamans transforming into bears and of bears possessing transformative abilities.³⁴ This spiritual connection reflects the respect and reverence Indigenous peoples have for polar bears. In general, Inuit see the polar bear “as their equal on many levels, insofar that it is a being capable of acting on its environment and can find solutions in order to adapt; it is not only a victim.”³⁵

Climate change and unpredictable sea-ice conditions have affected Inuit hunting practises; in places like Tuktoyaktuk and Aklavik, satellite images of sea ice are now needed for polar bear

28 Rode et al., “Inūpialq Knowledge of Polar Bears,” 240.

29 Stirling, “Combining Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge,” n.p.

30 D'Anglure, “Nanook, super-male,” 183.

31 Vaudry, “Conflicting Understandings in Polar Bear Co-management,” 154.

32 *Ibid.*, 155.

33 Sansoulet et al., “An Update on Inuit Perceptions,” 5.

34 Polar Life, “Nanuq – Polar Bear,” n.p.

35 Vaudry, “Conflicting Understandings in Polar Bear Co-management,” 154.

hunting.³⁶ Furthermore, polar bear hunting has gained even more respect among the Inuit due to international limits on hunting other northern species.³⁷ A challenging concept for Western perspectives is the idea of obtaining the bear's consent for capture, deeply rooted in Inuit cosmology and practices. Elders explain that bears select their hunters after observation, approaching those they recognise as good people who need the meat and will share it with the community.³⁸ An elder in Wainwright, Alaska, notes that sharing the meat is “part of our tradition. It's part of who we are; we are interconnected with our sea mammals and land mammals.”³⁹ Conflicts have arisen between scientists and Inuit communities over restrictions on polar bear hunting. Vaudry explains that this conflict stems from the dominance of Western rationality over Inuit relationality and “the misunderstanding of the latter by the former.” For the Inuit, polar bear hunting is rooted in a worldview that sees the bear as “an intelligent and sentient being.”⁴⁰ This perspective reflects the complex relationships the Inuit have with nature, where the polar bear holds a special status. Hunting symbolises this unique relationship, with both the Inuit and the polar bear playing active roles. For the Inuit, hunting is crucial as it encompasses various aspects of their identity and allows them to reaffirm it through practice.⁴¹ Importantly, the polar bear hunt operates under a framework that contrasts sharply with capitalist priorities, and is embedded in “an economy of respect and social reaffirmation [...] between the Inuit and the bear.”⁴²

The polar bear as icon of climate change

The melting of Arctic ice due to climate change directly threatens polar bear habitats, as they rely on sea ice for hunting and breed-

36 Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 190.

37 Vaudry, “Conflicting Understandings in Polar Bear Co-management,” 156–7.

38 *Ibid.*, 157.

39 Rode et al., *Iñupiaq Knowledge of Polar Bears*, 244.

40 Vaudry, “Conflicting Understandings in Polar Bear Co-management,” 161.

41 *Ibid.*, 161.

42 *Ibid.*, 158.

ing.⁴³ Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier notes that changing sea ice has altered polar bear behaviour, leading to more bears appearing in coastal communities.⁴⁴ Tom S. Smith et al. discuss how Arctic landscapes are now haunted by starving and scavenging polar bears, increasing conflicts between people and bears.⁴⁵ Indigenous people have also observed more polar bears foraging for garbage and behaving aggressively near or inside communities,⁴⁶ highlighting the dire consequences of habitat loss. In places like Ittoqqortoormiit, east Greenland, daily polar bear patrols are now necessary for safety.⁴⁷ Alongside these developments, the polar bear has become the poster child for climate change,⁴⁸ frequently depicted in precarious situations in the media, thus transforming them from “symbols of cold, unbounded polar wilderness, to symbols of an ecosystem in crisis and a planet in peril.”⁴⁹ However, this focus on polar bears often overshadows the impact on Indigenous communities, whose lives and cultures are also greatly affected by climate change. “When the vast majority of people think of the Arctic,” writes Watt-Cloutier, “they still think of polar bears, not people,” adding that this illustrates well how Arctic people are “misunderstood or ignored by much of the world.”⁵⁰

Media images and texts have increasingly reinforced an animal-at-risk narrative for the polar bear.⁵¹ Dorothea Born’s 2019 study outlines how the “process of iconization”⁵² has manifested in *National Geographic’s* representation of polar bears since the mid-2000s:

43 Polar Bears International, “Life Cycle,” n.p.

44 Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*, location 2703.

45 Smith et al., “Anthropogenic Food,” 426.

46 Wong et al., “Inuit Perspectives of Polar Bear Research,” 261; Laforest, “Traditional Knowledge of Polar Bears,” 48; Laidre, Northey, and Ugarte, “Traditional Knowledge About Polar Bears,” 12 and 14; Lund, “Changing Times,” 138; Tyrrell, “More bears, less bears,” 192.

47 Lund, “Changing Times,” 138–9.

48 See e.g. Born, “Bearing Witness,” 656–657; Brode-Roger, “Starving Polar Bears and Melting Ice,” 507; Emmerson, *The Future History of the Arctic*, 151; Fee, *Polar Bear*, 166; Henderson, “Bear Tales,” 257; Wheeler, *The Magnetic North*, 4.

49 Dodds and Nuttall, *The Arctic*, 109.

50 Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*, location 4224.

51 Whitley and Kalof, “Animal Imagery in the Discourse of Climate Change,” 14.

52 Born, “Bearing Witness,” 656.

Analysing the process of iconization of polar bears in *National Geographic* reveals an emotionalized account of individual suffering. First, the bears are put in the context of their habitat and then put in danger due to climate change. Over time, readers can gradually perceive new facets of the bears, so that the bears come to appear as affected witnesses of global climate change. Because the bears are anthropomorphized subjects of identification, their misery and sorrow function as a stand-in for humanity's problems and the drifting ice floe becomes a metaphor for earth's vulnerability. [...] The icon of the polar bear thus allows personalizing the abstract and temporally remote issue of climate change. Linking polar bears to the Arctic, the icon enables to localize this global phenomenon [...] and, further, allows visualizing its effects and consequences. Thus, the icon fosters identification with an endangered species, provides 'public proof' for climate change and allows raising awareness for this timely matter.⁵³

Similarly, Saffron O'Neill's 2022 article outlines how polar bears were politicised in the 2000s, especially after being listed as "threatened" under the ESA (US Endangered Species Act) in 2008, and increasingly featured in media visuals, such as *National Geographic* and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).⁵⁴ This created a visual narrative of the looming danger to humanity due to climate change.⁵⁵ Reading these developments through a hauntological lens, O'Neill shows that by the 2010s, the polar bear had become a "visual metonym" for the environmental crisis, with images of polar bears on ice floes having "come to embody (to *haunt*) our imagination of climate change and, from this, [...] come to be normalised."⁵⁶ She asks, "Why do polar bear images persist in having significance (why do they continue to *haunt*) our visual imaginings of climate change?"⁵⁷ O'Neill further argues that by the end of the 2010s, polar bear images had become obdurate, a persistent symbol of climate change, inseparable from the issue itself.⁵⁸ This

53 Ibid., 659.

54 O'Neill, "Defining a visual metonym," 1109.

55 Ibid., 1110.

56 Ibid., 1105, my emphasis.

57 Ibid., 1105, my emphasis.

58 Ibid., 1111.

accords with Henry McGhie’s 2019 statement that the future of polar bears serves as an early warning for other regions, wildlife and human society.⁵⁹ Thus, polar bears’ endangered status resonates universally, a warning of future dangers for all life. These assessments are crucial because the process they describe coincides with the publication of Vicki Jarrett and Helen McClory’s works, discussed below.

From colonialism to climate change: polar bears in Scottish narratives

The current iconization of the polar bear marks a significant shift from how European colonisers once perceived it. These contrasting perspectives – colonial vs. environmentally conscious – are evident in the three Scottish texts examined here. These tales provide insights into different stages of European interactions with the Arctic and show how attitudes towards the region and its iconic animal have drastically changed. Hogg’s *Surpassing Adventure of Allan Gordon* reflects early nineteenth-century British Arctic exploration ideas, and imperialistic and gendered attitudes, wherein the Arctic is seen as a space to be mapped and colonised by heroic male explorers. In contrast, McClory’s “The Companion” and Jarrett’s *Always North* highlight a change in perspective, commenting on the consequences of our exploitative relationship with the Arctic. The polar bear-human interactions in these stories reflect the different times in which they were written. Hogg’s text (satirically) addresses the colonial enterprise and Arctic exploration, while the twenty-first century texts portray polar bears as symbols of the climate emergency, illustrating the severe impact of humanity’s excessive use of natural resources and of anthropogenic climate change.

Today, Scotland is seen as a leader in environmental action, supported by various initiatives and progressive climate policies. However, challenges like inconsistencies in action, corporate-style

59 McGhie, “Museum Polar Bears and Climate Change,” 121.

greenwashing, and the enduring influence of the oil and gas industry reveal a more complex and contradictory reality.⁶⁰ Perhaps in response to these complexities, contemporary Scottish writers, including Kirsty Logan, Jenni Fagan, John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie, Roseanne Watt, and Linda Cracknell, increasingly focus on ecological themes. McClory's "The Companion" and Jarrett's *Always North* correspond to these literary engagements. In fact, Louisa Gairn argues that modern Scottish literature continues a tradition of engaging with ecological science and philosophy, offering a distinct and meaningful perspective on global environmentalism.⁶¹ McClory and Jarrett contribute to this ongoing ecological engagement. In contrast, Hogg's depiction of the Arctic as both beautiful and perilous reflects early nineteenth-century Romanticism. However, his "wild burlesque" of popular colonial adventure and Arctic exploration genres⁶² subverts typical portrayals of heroic masculinity and colonial control in such narratives.

The stories by Hogg, McClory and Jarrett offer unique perspectives on the Arctic, reflecting Scotland's historical and cultural connections to the region as well as its "distinct historical, social, economic and political interests in the Arctic," such as environmental changes affecting Scottish fisheries.⁶³ Arctic whaling, a significant Scottish industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, boosted economic growth in northeast Scotland;⁶⁴ importantly, Hogg's *Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon* features a protagonist employed on a whaling ship. Scots also played a substantial role in Arctic exploration, contributing to scientific knowledge and cultural representations, as outlined by Edward J. Cowan in his study of explorers like John Ross, John Richardson and John Rae.⁶⁵ Importantly, the following analysis of the three selected texts fills a gap left by studies primarily focused on visual media and North American contexts (as those discussed above) by exploring how

60 Macdonald and Sassi, "Environment, Ecology, Climate and 'Nature,'" n.p.

61 Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, 10.

62 Duncan, "Introduction," 8.

63 Johnstone, "An Arctic Strategy," 114 and 117.

64 Sanger, *Scottish Arctic Whaling*, 138 and 19.

65 Cowan, *Northern Lights*.

Scottish literary texts reflect and contribute to shifting representations of the polar bear.

Colonising and domesticating the Arctic: Nancy the companion, servant and spouse

James Hogg's *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon*⁶⁶ is a novella first published posthumously in 1837 in *Tales and Sketches of the Ettrick Shepherd* by Blackie and Son, Glasgow. The 1837 publication was shortened and altered; the original, longer tale was transcribed and edited by Gillian Hughes and published by the James Hogg society in 1987. This article refers to the longer text. The story's narrator, Allan Gordon, is the sole survivor of a shipwreck in the Arctic. After killing a female polar bear, he befriends its cub, naming it Nancy "after the only girl I had ever loved."⁶⁷ They become intimate companions, living in the wrecked ship and then travelling across the ice together, eventually joining a group of descendants of the Norse Greenlanders. The novella, loosely based on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719),⁶⁸ echoes "specific episodes, phrases, and obsessions" from Defoe's text.⁶⁹ Robert W. Rix describes it as a "Robinsonade in the Arctic"⁷⁰ and a "dark satire" questioning the "colonial confidence" of *Robinson Crusoe*.⁷¹ Hogg draws on or is influenced by works like John Harris's *Navigatum atque Itinerantium Bibliotheca* (1705), James Thomson's *Winter* (1726), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799), William Scoresby's *Account of the Arctic Regions* (1820) and contemporary reports on the Arctic expeditions of John Ross and William Parry.⁷² Hughes sees the novella as "one of the most dis-

66 Henceforth referred to as *Allan Gordon*.

67 Hogg, *Allan Gordon*, n.p. All subsequent references are to this text.

68 Rix, "James Hogg's tale of the Arctic wild," 173.

69 Hughes, "Reading and Inspiration," 22.

70 Rix, "James Hogg's tale of the Arctic wild," 179.

71 Rix, *The Vanished Settlers of Greenland*, 215.

72 See Hughes, "Reading and Inspiration," 22–32; Woolf, "Milkmaid Bears and Savage Mates," 313; Fielding, "No Pole nor Pillar," 58; and Moss, "Romanticism on Ice," n.p.

tinctive, energetic and characteristic of Hogg's tales"⁷³ and Penny Fielding notes that it "offers a gleefully Gothic picture of the North," satirising sober Arctic reports,⁷⁴ while Rix states that it reflects on nineteenth-century ambitions to subdue the Arctic "by man's knowledge, mapping, and control."⁷⁵ While the novella clearly parodies colonial and exploration stories, it strongly reflects prevalent nineteenth-century attitudes towards the Arctic that were disseminated through the texts Hogg was influenced by.⁷⁶ The element of colonialism is highly important and symbolised in the human-animal relationship at the novella's centre.

While polar bears reflect both "physical and epistemological threat[s] posed by the Arctic"⁷⁷ in Hogg's *Allan Gordon*, they are also anthropomorphised, most overtly through Hogg's descriptions of Allan and Nancy's relationship. First, looking at the female polar bear he has killed, Allan comments: "I saw it stretching out its limbs in death and its feet and thighs so like those of a human creature." Later, he sees polar bear tracks in the snow but thinks they are "the steps of human beings." Nancy the cub then becomes Allan's beloved and adopted child, whose society he enjoys, looking on her "as a treasure sent me by heaven in a most wonderful way and [I] really loved her." Nancy serves Allan by catching fish and obeying commands, becoming a useful, subservient companion deeply attached to her master ("constant to me as my shadow"), doing his every bidding: "She was not only a most useful slave but a social and agreeable companion." As Nancy grows, she becomes more like a beloved spouse, with Allan referring to her as

73 Hughes, "Reading and Inspiration," 32.

74 Fielding, "No Pole nor Pillar," 47.

75 Rix, "James Hogg's tale of the Arctic wild," 173 and 175.

76 While Hogg draws on many exploration texts, and colonial attitudes shine through the protagonist's representation of Nancy and the Arctic, Hogg himself would have held more ambivalent opinions on the Arctic venture. As outlined by Duncan (see "Introduction," 1–2), Hogg was of tenant farmer stock and was grudgingly accepted into Edinburgh's literary circles despite his undeniable talent; even professed friends from those circles would question his genius by poking fun at his origins. It would therefore seem likely that Hogg harboured little loyalty to a British Empire dominated by an English (or Anglicised), exclusively upper-class elite. Duncan importantly states that "Hogg writes against the ideological frameworks – of rank or class, religion, politics, nationality, sexuality and gender – that structured public and domestic life in the period, and that it was literature's implicit task to reproduce" ("Introduction," 8).

77 Moss, "Romanticism on Ice," n.p.

his “sleeping partner” and “own dear Nancy.” The sexual undertones are clear:

Yes she lay in my bosom and though certainly a most uncourtly mate she being the only one I had I loved her sincerely I might almost stay intensely. [...] She answered to her name and came at my bidding and when we walked out upon the ice I took her paw in my arm and learned her to walk upright. A pretty couple certainly we were I dressed like a gentleman in my late captain’s holiday clothes and she walking arm in arm with me with her short steps her long taper neck and unfeasible long head.

After Nancy is injured while protecting Allan, he cares for her, making the sexual dimension of their relationship explicit: “I dried her with a cloth combed her and made her as clean as a bride.” This is seen by Fee to provide “an analogue to ‘selkie stories’ where seal men and women transform into lovers for humans,”⁷⁸ while Woolf argues that Nancy’s role as bride makes the tale into “a cross-gender version of the folktale motif of the monster animal as bridegroom.”⁷⁹ The sexual element of Allan and Nancy’s relationship therefore does not only tap into – and perhaps draw from – motifs found in e.g. Inuit folklore on polar bears as spouses and/or adopted children, but also more generally into human-animal relations as presented in both northern-European myth and folklore (e.g. the selkie myths of Scotland and Iceland), as well as that of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic (e.g. the stories of Kiviuk and his animal spouses). Given Hogg’s interest in Scottish ballads, it is likely he was aware of Scottish selkie myths, where boundaries between human and natural worlds are fluid.

As can be seen, the man-bear relationship in Hogg’s story symbolises the colonisation, domestication, and feminisation of the Arctic. Rix supports this by noting, “The relationship Gordon develops with Nancy speaks to the eroticisation of colonised space, which is a well-known trope in English writing.”⁸⁰ Moss echoes Rix’s words, viewing the relationship as the “triumph of *homo eco-*

78 Fee, *Polar Bear*, 97.

79 Woolf, “Milkmaid Bears and Savage Mates,” 313.

80 Rix, *The Vanished Settlers of Greenland*, 225.

nomicus over the native representative of strange space, and act of intellectual colonisation by domestication.”⁸¹ Fee adds that Nancy symbolises Greenland, akin to “the Queen of the Arctic in the *Punch* cartoon, ‘waiting to be won.’”⁸² However, as David Robb points out, Hogg is a master of deliberate ambiguity.⁸³ This also applies to *Allan Gordon*. As Allan and Nancy join the Norse colonists, Allan’s sexual involvement with the women displeases Nancy, who shows “extreme” unhappiness when “debarred from sleeping by me,” moaning at night and looking with “a gleam of jealousy in her eye towards some of the women.” She eventually leaves Allan, joins a group of polar bears, and later returns with them to attack the colonists, sparing only Allan. Nancy, now described as “an immense powerful bear” and a “huge animal,” saves Allan but then joins the other bears in devouring the other people, revealing her true nature: “she [...] licked my hand and then scampered off to share the prey with her associates.” Hence, as Rix argues, Allan’s attempt to domesticate Nancy and make her his companion is “an unsustainable folly, a quixotic attempt to control the Arctic that is doomed to failure.”⁸⁴ While the story initially supports gendered and chauvinistic views of the Arctic, Nancy’s return to her natural instincts is an action that altogether spurns a masculinist and colonialist regulation. Hogg’s story thus subverts expectations of a heroic nationalist Arctic survival tale and critiques British self-confidence, foreshadowing the disillusionment following the Franklin Expedition’s loss in the mid-1840s.⁸⁵

Haunted icescapes: the starving companion

Since Hogg’s *Allan Gordon* was written during the British Empire’s zenith, much has changed, and our perceptions of the polar bear and the Arctic have greatly altered. Once symbolising strength,

81 Moss, “Romanticism on Ice,” n.p.

82 Fee, *Polar Bear*, 97.

83 Robb, “Introduction,” ix.

84 Rix, “James Hogg’s tale of the Arctic wild,” 181.

85 Rix, *The Vanished Settlers of Greenland*, 219.

independence and the ability to survive in an extremely harsh climate, the polar bear now represents “vulnerability and the global ecological crisis [... and has been] transformed into a threatened species in need of human protection.”⁸⁶ Helen McClory’s 2018 short story collection *Mayhem & Death* is described by the author as a “dark” exploration of contemporary life’s pain and isolation, marked by the Anthropocene, authoritarianism, Brexit and similar issues.⁸⁷ The issues at the centre of the micro-story “The Companion” fit with this description. Unlike the masculine perspective of Hogg’s novella, this story, along with Vicki Jarrett’s *Always North*, centres on a female character. Importantly, McClory sees crafting stories that predominantly feature female protagonists as a challenge to gender roles;⁸⁸ here, the figure traversing the Arctic is a lone woman, not a male explorer seeking heroic feats.

“The Companion” reflects current ideas on the polar bear and the climate crisis, positioning the iconic animal as symbolic of the ecological disaster and presenting both human and animal as victims. McClory’s approach is complex; the three-page story leaves much to interpretation. Louisa, a lone Arctic trekker, has been followed by a starving and emaciated polar bear “these past three nights.”⁸⁹ Inspired by Norwegian adventurer Cecilie Skog, McClory explores themes of the loneliness, danger, and fragility of long journeys in the Arctic and elsewhere.⁹⁰ The polar bear, presented as a victim of climate change, is described as having “yellow fur hung low on its body. Skin loose, and starving under it.”⁹¹ The bear’s position in a wrecked world is a fragile one,⁹² but so is the human’s, too, especially in this setting: “It is not hard to be outpaced even by a sickly polar bear, nor are appointments with death in the arctic ever truly unexpected.”⁹³ Louisa could potentially be read as representing (European) humanity’s encroachment on the Arctic, using

86 Wærp, “The Polar Bear in Nordic Literature,” 82.

87 McClory, “Novels Are the Devil,” interview by Thom Cuell, n.p.

88 McClory, “An Interview with Helen McClory,” by Burning House Press, n.p.

89 McClory, “The Companion,” 143.

90 McClory, Messenger message to author, 14 June 2022.

91 McClory, “The Companion,” 144.

92 McClory, Messenger message to author, 14 June 2022.

93 McClory, “The Companion,” 144.

its resources and attempting to dominate it. This is essentially the polar bear's space and Louisa is intruding, as the author explains.⁹⁴ Yet McClory's clear feminist stance (also evident throughout the whole of *Mayhem & Death*) challenges the set gender roles inherent in masculinist and colonialist narratives of Arctic exploration – such as those reflected in Hogg's tale – and therefore this interpretation is somewhat problematic.⁹⁵ More generally, though, regardless of gender, individual complicity, guilt, or innocence, Louisa embodies anthropocentric hubris. Louisa knows this as the hungry bear traces her steps; it is hungry, but in order *not* to be hungry – in fact, to be *more* than sated – humanity has overexploited nature. Louisa cannot outpace the bear, nor can she avoid a reckoning despite her efforts each day to “ward off” the bear with blood sigils.⁹⁶ Hence, she decides to face what is haunting her:

Walking towards the bear, she thought about herself as a presence in this space, blocked off from free movement by her own heavy clothes. If she was a primal figure it was that of hubris, of course. The bear was hunger, the kind of goddess figure no religion in human history has ever prayed to, only to escape. Hunger, need. Black eyes and panting, wheezing mouth full of long yellow teeth.⁹⁷

The polar bear, though real, is depicted as a spectral figure, its presence in the landscape a sort of ‘environmental haunting.’ Indicative of the bear's spectrality or uncanniness is the reaction of Louisa's compass needle, “the iron growing frantic as the distance between her and the white bear lessened.”⁹⁸ This representation can be interpreted in tandem with Indigenous beliefs; as demonstrated above, the Inuit see polar bears as spiritual beings that embody the interconnectedness of all life, and this resonates with the theme of environmental haunting at the centre of McClory's story.⁹⁹

94 McClory, Messenger message to author, 14 June 2022.

95 The author would like to thank one of the peer reviewers for pointing out this complexity.

96 McClory, “The Companion,” 143.

97 Ibid., 144.

98 McClory, “The Companion,” 144.

99 Another aspect that is arguably important to the story's focus on haunting is how rural Scotland has shaped McClory's writing, but she says this has happened not only through its landscapes but also through its myths, an enduring sense of an “ongoing haunting,” and experiences that appear

Another aspect that links McClory's story with Inuit perspectives on the polar bear, is that it elevates the notion of the hunter and the hunted, subverting the idea that "the brutality of the hunter is without beauty," as McClory describes it.¹⁰⁰ This is especially evident in the final scenes, where human and animal, the one who is being *haunted* and the one who is *haunting*, come together at a pool of red roses rising from the water's depths:

[...] eventually the black, red-filled pool rose to a lake. The polar bear sat breathing with the familiar wheeze, mouth open, staring at her. [...]

The polar bear came to the pile. It nosed them [the roses] first, then began eating. So Louisa picked up a red bloom and ate it too. Velvet and tender.

Louisa lay down beside the roses. The bear lay down, still now and then licking up a blossom and chewing it noisily. Together they waited, curled. Louisa thought: to be given the inexplicable alongside death. And also: this seems then the whole package of dying, like the dying in a painting.¹⁰¹

Human and animal are united through death, with the redness of the roses and the redness of blood, both partaking in a kind of ritual or communion. The scene could be read through the lens of Inuit beliefs concerning polar bears as spiritual beings that offer themselves to hunters. In this reading, the sharing of the roses between Louisa and the bear symbolises mutual recognition and respect, in line with Inuit ideas concerning the exchange between hunter and prey. On yet another level, the image of red blooming through the water signposts the bear's actions in nature when hunting, as with the sea water turning red after the killing of a seal. Further, the human-bear union is symbolic of the fact that due to humanity's misguided actions – which have brought us close to a global calamity – human and animal have become dependent on each other for survival. By destroying the earth's ecosystems and wildlife, we effectively destroy ourselves; when reduced to the bare

only as faint shadows. See McClory, "Novels Are the Devil," interview by Thom Cuell, n.p.

100 McClory, Messenger message to author, 14 June 2022.

101 McClory, "The Companion," 145.

need for survival, there is no distinction between human and animal. Both are united by the threat of anthropogenic climate change. This strongly evocative scene is therefore infused with multilayered and complex symbolic meaning.

Haunted icecapes: the Arctic fights back

While McClory's micro-story symbolically explores the roles of animals and humans amid environmental calamity, Vicki Jarrett's *Always North* (2019) presents a chilling vision of the future if we do not take drastic action to stop global warming. *Always North* is both a literary sci-fi and cli-fi (climate fiction) novel, cli-fi being a genre that "engages with climate change by imagining its catastrophic consequences [... and] features climate change as an explicit plot element."¹⁰² Cli-fi borrows from various literary styles and genres,¹⁰³ and in Jarrett's novel this includes postmodern fiction, literary fiction, speculative sci-fi and dystopias. As Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra outline, cli-fi novels like *Always North* explore anthropogenic climate change "not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship."¹⁰⁴ McSorley's review places *Always North* "at the forefront of contemporary science fiction, [being] not only a prophecy but a mirror," noting that its shifting structure serves as an allegory for the climate change it explores.¹⁰⁵

Always North has a dual timeline: one set on the oil survey vessel *Polar Horizon* in the Arctic Ocean during the summer of 2025, and the other in a dystopian future in the Scottish Highlands in 2045. By 2045, climate change has severely impacted society, forcing thousands to leave coastal cities for the mountains due to rising and unpredictable sea levels. The dystopian sections are set in Aviemore and the Cairngorm Mountains, chosen because of

102 Caracciolo, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, 10.

103 Goodbody and Johns-Putra, "Introduction," 1.

104 *Ibid.*, 2.

105 McSorley, "Review of *Always North*", 109, 108.

Jarrett's familiarity with the area¹⁰⁶ and due to the influence of Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (1977),¹⁰⁷ a classic of Scottish nature writing.¹⁰⁸ Isobel, the narrator and main character, is a software engineer on the *Polar Horizon*, operating the survey system, aptly – and ironically – named Proteus.¹⁰⁹ Isobel is neither a hero nor an anti-hero, Jarrett explains, but represents the reality of most people, who are in different ways morally compromised through their work and actions.¹¹⁰ Through Isobel, Jarrett explores our complicity and accountability when it comes to our messed-up environment¹¹¹ and Isobel functions in this respect as an “every-person,” and a distinctly Scottish one due to her “sharp-tongued sense of humour.”¹¹² Octavia Cade argues this is “the meat at the heart of” Jarrett's novel: “the compromises, and the justifications, that people can make in the service of apocalypse.”¹¹³ Despite her qualms about working for an oil company, Isobel needs to earn a living and hopes things will sort themselves out.¹¹⁴ The novel raises questions about collective guilt and the climate crisis, with no easy answers.

Once the *Polar Horizon* enters the Arctic Ocean, a huge male polar bear begins stalking the ship:

In the distance a patch of something off-white, a different shade from the ice and snow, is moving from floe to floe [...] The bear stops and

106 Jarrett, “Vicki Jarrett,” interview by Scots Whay Hael, n.p.; Jarrett, “Vicki Jarrett – Pointing North,” interview by Ian Maloney, 104.

107 The book was written in the 1940s but only published over thirty years later.

108 Jarrett explains that Shepherd's book “captures the beauty and wildness of the Cairngorms in a way I've not come across elsewhere. Her descriptions lean into the timeless and otherworldly feel of the mountains and an old sense of connection to the land.” Jarrett, email interview with the author, 20 November 2024.

109 According to Greek mythology, Proteus was a prophetic old man of the sea and a shepherd of the sea animals. He could see into the past, present and future, but was reluctant to reveal his knowledge. He could change shape and therefore came to be seen by some “as a symbol of the original matter from which the world was created.” See Britannica, “Proteus,” n.p.

110 Jarrett, “Vicki Jarrett,” interview by Scots Whay Hael, n.p.

111 Jarrett, “Interview with Vicki Jarrett,” by Civilian Reader, n.p.

112 McSorley, “Review of *Always North*,” 108, 109.

113 Cade, “Always North by Vicki Jarrett,” n.p.

114 Jarrett herself used to do her own “piece of morally compromised work,” working for a company that makes software for seismic exploration industry; she has therefore built her own experiences into the portrayal of her central character. See Jarrett, “Vicki Jarrett,” interview by Scots Whay Hael, n.p.

stares, his long neck extended, head low and level with his massive shoulders, his feet planted wide, claws hooking him into the ice. We [...] watch him watching us. [...] I look at the bear's forepaws, big as dinner plates, the way his jaw hangs slightly open so I can see the black line of his lower lip, and behind that teeth. The bear is terrible in his whiteness. [...] He turns and walks alongside us. Surely we're going faster than polar bear walking speed? The way he proceeds across the ice field with singular purpose and utter certainty, the weighty roll of his shoulders and swagger of his back legs, seems to say that he is in charge of that sort of thing: speed, distance, time. They belong to him, not to us, and he will do with them what he wills. The way he plants each foot on the ice stakes his claim. Mine, mine, mine, his footsteps say. This place belongs to me, it is of me and you are trespassing.

I doubt he will forgive us our trespasses, this great white god of the north.¹¹⁵

Unlike McClory's white bear, Jarrett's bear is tangibly uncanny and otherworldly. It is described as fearsome and terrifying ("terrible in its whiteness")¹¹⁶ and as a fiercely protective spiritual guardian of the Arctic ("stakes his claim"; "you are trespassing"; "this great white god of the north"). Furthermore, Captain Bjornsen¹¹⁷ claims he encountered and was attacked by this same bear years ago, which should be impossible given a bear's lifespan:

"I know this bear," he says, fingertips tracing the line of his scar. "Don't know how old he was when he gave me this but he was full grown [...] He seemed then the biggest bear I'd ever seen. Watch him now though. That Nanuuk is no skinny old wreck. [...] This is not possible. Bears live only twenty, maybe twenty-five years." Outside, the bear paces, his foot-

115 Jarrett, *Always North*, 54–55.

116 The influence of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) on Jarrett's portrayal of the white bear as a "great white menace" is acknowledged by the author, though she describes it as quite a general one since she had not read Melville's novel when she began writing her novel, reading it only to make sure she would not be "sailing too close to it." See Jarrett, "Vicki Jarrett," interview by Scots Whay Hael, n.p. Jarrett, *Always North*, 54–55.

117 Importantly, Bjornsen's name means "son of the bear." Also, his injury (described in the quote below) may be another reference to Melville's *Moby Dick*, as Captain Ahab was also injured by the "great white menace" of Melville's text, losing his leg on an earlier whaling trip when the giant white whale, Moby Dick, bit it off.

falls rhythmic, marking time. Bjornsen's voice catches. "But there he is."¹¹⁸

From this point, the great white bear haunts the ship and crew, his sinister and awe-inspiring presence a symbolic reminder of the violation of nature's laws by their oil expedition. His movements and behaviour pose a warning which the crew do not heed, with dire consequences. The huge male bear, as king and protector of the Arctic, represents humanity's environmental transgressions and the Arctic's fight against them. Thus, Jarrett's polar bear functions as both a guardian and a hauntological figure, embodying a warning and a lament for what has been destroyed.

The *Polar Horizon's* advance into the Arctic and the use of the oil-searching survey system trigger an imbalance, accelerating ice melt and causing the deaths of countless animals. A terrible sound, described by Isobel as not "a bang or a whimper but a rending, a tearing of this time, this now from everything that will follow – the infliction of a wound that can never heal"¹¹⁹ seems to catalyse the following events. The ice flows "against the current" with a "sound of the world ripping open."¹²⁰ At this moment, the polar bear strikes, suddenly appearing onboard the ship. The narrative then jumps to 2045, revealing a greatly changed world where Isobel is still haunted by memories of the bear:

I wake, several times at night. [...] It's always the same. The white arctic light, the sound of splintering ice. Knowing I have to run but unable to make my legs move. [...] All the time the bear is coming closer and closer, the feeling of impotent panic building until I wake, [...] staring wildly into the darkness, the bear's breath hot on my face.¹²¹

Despite Isobel's reluctance to remember, the past proves inescapable. The 2045 narrative includes flashbacks to the 2025 expedition, revealing events up to the point when animals have begun to die and the *Polar Horizon* seems about to sink, with the bear trapped

118 Jarrett, *Always North*, 56.

119 Ibid., 108.

120 Ibid., 109, 110.

121 Ibid., 163–164.

onboard. As Isobel listens to the animals die, Jarrett's description highlights the link between Isobel and the polar bear, hinted at throughout the story:

there's only the ice and the animals. [...] Each in their own *savsat*,¹²² singing their own songs of death, there's whale, seal, walrus. Everything that could live here is dying. [...] Even in my cabin I can hear that terrible music through the walls. [...] Sometimes I imagine I can hear a bassline of heavy footfalls under the high notes of the dying animals. The trapped bear on the deck above, pacing back and forth. Paw prints in ice. The bear stops directly overhead where I lie on my side [...] The click and scrape of claws so close through the ceiling as he lies down and curls on his side to sleep. His shape mirroring mine. My breath echoing his. Our dreams drifting down like snow and settling in stratified layers.¹²³

The bear appears to have spared Isobel during an earlier attack. Ralf, who tends to her wounds, says, "that bear must have been a surgeon in another life. It's like he was trying to make sure you would live,"¹²⁴ suggesting an unexplained affinity between the two.

Isobel's nightmares and memories of the Arctic expedition therefore strongly suggest that the events of 2025 had a great impact on the situation as it is depicted in the dystopian 2045 sections of *Always North*. These sections depict a bleak future amidst climate chaos, comparable to typical cli-fi scenarios described by Goodbody and Johns-Putra: "Imaginings of the future impact of climate change typically involve desertification, drought and water shortage, floods and violent storms, the spread of tropical diseases, climate refugeeism and the collapse of a society divided between rich and poor into lawlessness and armed conflict."¹²⁵ Due to rising water levels, people have retreated to the Cairngorms in Scotland, where Aviemore, or "Avie,"¹²⁶ has become a refuge for those fleeing

122 Greenlandic term for the ice entrapment of animals.

123 Jarrett, *Always North*, 234.

124 *Ibid.*, 188.

125 Goodbody and Johns-Putra, "Introduction," 5.

126 Jarrett, *Always North*, 117.

coastal areas. Isobel struggles to survive in a society on the brink of anarchy, where living on the fringes “has now become commonplace as the old systems and structures fray under pressure.”¹²⁷ Seeking respite from a bleak existence of scraping by on odd jobs and numbing herself with drink, Isobel accepts a job at the Northolt research centre in the Cairngorms. This involves brain scans and reading her 2025 diary entries out loud, aptly described by Cade as a “handwavium of quantum physics and mind mapping.”¹²⁸ Jarrett’s descriptions enter the realm of sci-fi when Isobel finds the polar bear she encountered twenty years earlier lying in a “high-tech version of a Sleeping Beauty’s coffin” made of glass that is “coated in a crisp layer of frost.”¹²⁹ Inside, she sees the horror of what Cade terms vivisection, with the bear essentially “a lab rat.”¹³⁰

His cranium is shaved, the dark exposed skin studded with a skull cap of silver wires and electrodes. Bolts at his temples and another in the centre pierce the skin and drive into the bone. Tiny lights blink decoratively. His eyes are closed but the lids puckered in a way so redolent of grief and loss that the emotion hits me in the chest.

Stretching back from the base of his skull, a six inch wide channel of fur has been shaved following the course of his spine. More wires and bolts protrude from the black skin, locked into the vertebrae. I can’t help thinking of the Proteus system, its long streamers of sensors collecting data. His jaws are held open, the formidable teeth resting on plastic tubing. [...]

That sound, so low and so very slow [...] flows back and forth in shallow waves [...] I struggle to interpret its meaning, to hear it for what it is.

Breath.¹³¹

The novel’s open-ended conclusion suggests that the great bear and Isobel together represent the only hope for mending the

127 Ibid., 122–123.

128 Cade, “Always North by Vicki Jarrett,” n.p.

129 Jarrett, *Always North*, 178.

130 Cade, “Always North by Vicki Jarrett,” n.p.

131 Jarrett, *Always North*, 179–180.

world, with the bear as a conduit for Isobel to travel back in time. Yet, this very representation, of the bear in the coffin, hooked up with wires, vivisected and experimented upon, underscores precisely what lies at the heart of the climate crisis: human exploitation of nature. What is being enacted upon the polar bear, even if intended to save the world, is wrong and immoral, and it equates with the evil of what the *Polar Horizon* expedition enacted upon the Arctic in 2025, as Isobel's reflections on the Proteus system clearly indicate. As Cade vehemently states: "You cannot save the natural world from being treated as an exploitable resource by treating the natural world as nothing but an exploitable resource. You just can't do it. More of the same will not save us."¹³²

Jarrett emphasises that her choice of a polar bear to confront her readers with the peril facing the world is quite intentional, as it is iconic in the context of climate change while also evoking a sense of affinity mixed with fear:

As we seem unable or unwilling to stop destroying their ecosystem, we may soon see the extinction of the polar bear. Of course, hundreds of other species of plants, animals and insects are going extinct every year, but we humans find it hard to connect with the loss of microscopic pond life, or fungi, for example. The monumental presence/absence of the polar bear is hard to ignore. They are also quite 'human-like' – they can look you in the eye and you will *feel* something, fear probably, but also some kinship perhaps. I wanted to convey that sense of connection, along with the instinctual fear. After all, at this point, we *should* be afraid, although more of ourselves than any bear.¹³³

This feeling of affinity manifests in Jarrett's portrayal of Isobel as being in some way connected with the bear that follows the *Polar Horizon*, even suggesting that Isobel "take[s] on bear-like characteristics herself."¹³⁴ Important here is the fact that the novel overtly references Indigenous beliefs about the polar bear's transformative power and ability to cross between worlds. In fact, Jarrett con-

132 Cade, "Always North by Vicki Jarrett," n.p.

133 Jarrett, email interview with the author, 20 November 2024, *italics original*.

134 Cade, "Always North by Vicki Jarrett," n.p.

sciously incorporates these non-Western/non-colonial perspectives due to her fascination with the “symbolism of the bear [...] as a guide between worlds and realities.”¹³⁵ She explains:

This resonated with how “my” bear was evolving [...] as a living link between time periods, between the human and non-human, and also as an embodiment of the natural world itself. [...] I find it incredible that indigenous knowledge, stretching back for hundreds of years is so often ignored and side-lined in debates about the environment. [...] perhaps, if there is any hope of salvation for the planet, [...] this will require *all* of our knowledge and understanding, not only from our relatively recent rational/scientific perspective— which, after all, is largely responsible for getting us into this mess in the first place.¹³⁶

The 2045 sections of *Always North* and the novel’s conclusion emphasise the affinity between Isobel and the polar bear. Also, it emerges that up north in 2025, Jules, Isobel’s lover and colleague, carved a polar bear figurine for her, explaining that for Inuit shamans the polar bear was “considered a very important helper, or companion” who would travel with the shaman to the spirit world.¹³⁷ When the bear reappears comatose in a glass coffin, it therefore no longer functions as “a malevolent spirit of nature come to terrorise the humans,” but instead has taken on “a more complex, metaphysical aspect.”¹³⁸ This again draws on Inuit myth and folklore where the polar bear provides “the main source of shamanic power.”¹³⁹ In essence, despite the disturbing treatment he receives at Northolt, the polar bear can ultimately be read as a guiding spirit and a companion to Isobel, a representation obviously inspired by Inuit beliefs.

In their introduction to *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, Elaine Gam, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson and Nils Bubandt state that “*Such strangeness, the uncanny*

135 Jarrett, email interview with the author, 20 November 2024.

136 Ibid., italics original.

137 Jarrett, *Always North*, 206.

138 McSorley, “Review of *Always North*, 108.

139 D’Anglure, “Nanook super-male,” 190.

*nature of nature, abounds in the Anthropocene, where life persists in the shadow of mass death.*¹⁴⁰ Even if the white bears in McClory and Jarrett's stories seem to be alive, material beings and in the flesh, they are spectral and uncanny manifestations of our world's perilous state, where we do indeed live under the shadow of death. Writing about haunted landscapes, Ruth Heholt states: "Ghosts inevitably reside in the in-between, whilst a haunted space is defined *as* being the in-between."¹⁴¹ The icescapes in McClory's "The Companion" and Jarrett's *Always North* are haunted, "in-between" spaces, poised between sustaining and not sustaining the bears, between a pre-Anthropocene natural world and the destabilised, threatened environment of the Anthropocene era.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lizanne Henderson's analysis of polar bear folktales can be applied to their function in the fictional texts analysed in this article:

Polar bear folktales embody archetypes [...] The usage of the bear in folktales as a personification of symbolic ideas or cultural mores is [...] rarely about the mammal itself but rather a projection or statement of belief regarding human identity or ethical principles. The bear is comprehended dually as the archetypal 'other' but also as a reflection of ourselves, *like* us and *unlike* us.¹⁴²

In all three works of fiction, the polar bear represents ideas regarding human identity, behaviour, and place in the world, reflecting colonial and gendered attitudes towards the Arctic or contemporary climate anxieties. The bears are depicted as reflections of humanity, both similar and different, companions and adversaries. The polar bear is central to these literary works, revealing different aspects of our relationship with the Arctic: Nancy the adopted

140 Gam, Tsing, Swanson and Bubandt, "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes," G8, italics original.

141 Heholt, "Introduction. *Unstable Landscapes*," 6, italics original.

142 Henderson, "Bear Tales," 256.

child, servant, companion and spouse in Hogg's *Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon*; the starving bear following Louisa in McClory's "The Companion"; and the fearsome guardian bear in Jarrett's *Always North*. Together, the three texts reflect on European/Western interactions with, and exploitation of, the Arctic, with the latter two highlighting the environmental consequences. They showcase both early British imperialistic and gendered attitudes as well as modern perspectives that acknowledge and criticise the damage caused by exploitation. In the latter two texts, the Arctic spirit, a revenant of past wrongdoings, appears as an 'environmental haunting' in the guise of a polar bear, the iconic symbol of climate change. The twenty-first century texts also reflect Inuit beliefs that view the polar bear as a spiritual guide and a symbol of resilience. This highlights the importance of incorporating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to develop a more holistic approach in addressing the climate crisis. Ultimately, Jarrett's novel offers a speculative conclusion to the narratives by Hogg and McClory. It is not a hopeful conclusion, but the roots of this outcome can clearly be traced back to the Eurocentric and colonialist hubris reflected and satirised in Hogg's nineteenth-century tale.

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ABSTRACT

**From Colonialism to Climate Crisis:
Polar Bears in the Fiction of James Hogg,
Helen McClory and Vicki Jarrett**

This article focuses on three Scottish texts, *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon* by James Hogg (1837), “The Companion” by Helen McClory (2018) and *Always North* by Vicki Jarrett (2019), all of which are set in the Arctic and feature polar bears. It argues for a reading of these literary works as showcasing two distinct stages in our relationship with the Arctic, as seen from a European (British/Scottish) perspective. The first text represents early nineteenth-century attitudes towards the Arctic, reflecting imperialistic and gendered ideas of the time. The latter two texts reveal significant changes in outlook, demonstrating acute awareness of – and sense of guilt regarding – the impact of anthropogenic climate change. The figure of the polar bear, the animal most associated with the Arctic, is pivotal to all three authors’ treatment of these issues. The texts feature polar bears as companion figures central to our relationship with the Arctic, with the latter two inviting a reading of the bears as spectral beings symbolic of an ‘environmental haunting’ that reflects the current climate crisis. Additionally, these modern texts incorporate Indigenous perspectives, portraying the polar bear as a spiritual guide and a symbol of resilience, thus enriching the narrative with traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and highlighting the interdependence of all living beings.

Keywords: polar bears, colonialism, climate crisis, Arctic, Scottish literature

**Frá nýlendustefnu til loftslagsváar.
Ísbirnir í skáldverkum eftir James Hogg,
Helen McClory og Vicki Jarrett**

Þessi grein fjallar um þrjú skosk bókmenntaverk, *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon* eftir James Hogg (1837), „The Companion“ eftir Helen McClory (2018) og *Always North* eftir Vicki Jarrett (2019). Öll verkin gerast á norðurslóðum og fjalla um ísbirni. Greining þessara bókmenntaverka sýnir hvernig þau endurspeglar tvö ólík stíg í samskiptum okkar við norðurslóðir, séð frá evrópsku (bresku/skosku) sjónarhorni. Fyrsta verkið speglar viðhorf frá fyrri hluta nítjándu aldar, sem byggðu á heimsvaldastefnu og kynjuðum hugmyndum þess tíma. Hinar tvær sögurnar endurspeglar hins vegar umtalsverðar breytingar á viðhorfum og sýna fram á skarpa vitund – og sektarkennd – gagnvart áhrifum loftslagsbreytinga af mannavöldum. Ísbjörninn, dýrið sem tengist norðurslóðum hvað sterkast, gegnir lykilhlutverki í meðferð allra þriggja höfundar á þessum málum. Verkin lýsa ísbirninum sem félagi eða fylgju aðalpersónanna, þar sem hann er miðlægur í tengslum manna við norðurslóðir. Nýrri verkin, eftir McClory og Jarrett, hvetja jafnframt til túlkunar á ísbirninum sem draugalegri veru sem táknar „umhverfislegar ásóknir“ vegna loftslagsváar nútímans. Auk þess má merkja greinileg áhrif af sjónarhorni frumbyggja norðurslóða á þessi nútímaverk, þar sem ísbirninum er lýst sem andlegum leiðsögumanni og tákni um styrk og seiglu. Þannig flétta McClory og Jarrett hefðbundinni vistfræðilegri þekkingu (TEK) inn í frásögnina og undirstrika hvernig allar lifandi verur eru háðar hver annari.

Lykilorð: ísbirnir, nýlendustefna, loftslagsvá, norðurslóðir, skoskar bókmennti