

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Emanuel, N. (2021) Book Review: Neil Christopher (ed.), *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories*. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 236-240. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

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Open Access:

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Neil Christopher (ed.), *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories*
(Iqaluit: Inhabit Media, 2019)

Nicole Emanuel

Abundant darkness, intense isolation, deadly cold, the largest carnivores currently stalking the Earth, and a rapidly-shifting climate that is growing ever more unstable. There are plenty of reasons why Northern latitudes offer unique material for tales tinged with terror. This is confirmed by the body of literature engaged in mapping the polar Gothic and the Arctic sublime, and it is wonderfully illustrated by *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories* (2019).

Taaqtumi was published by Inhabit Media, an Inuit-owned publishing company based in Nunavut. By highlighting the work of Indigenous authors, this collection presents an important view of how Gothic and horror themes intersect with Arctic settings. The nine stories collected here are wide-ranging in subject and style, yet all draw upon fears deeply rooted in the cultures and environments of the North. Both the history and current-day realities of life in this region are explored here from a variety of perspectives. Although *Taaqtumi* leans into tropes of polar literature that paint the landscape as harsh and deadly, it does so in a way that manages to hold lots of surprises for the reader. Furthermore, it avoids the exoticism that mars so much fiction written by authors who have simply passed through polar areas and cannot claim experience of daily life in these extreme environs.

Some of the contributors to *Taaqtumi* are already recognised authors with awards and well-loved works to their name. Aviaq Johnston's young adult novel *Those Who Run in the Sky* (2017) won an Indigenous Voices Award and was a finalist for a Governor General's Award and Burt Award. Richard Van Camp is another prize-winning author, whose novel *The Lesser Blessed* (1996) was adapted into a film by Anita Doran in 2012. However, *Taaqtumi* shines a light on less established writers, too, as well as artists who have worked in other media; Anguti Johnston, K.C. Carthew, and Jay Bulckaert are all known primarily as filmmakers, though their work here proves that they are also adept writers of fiction.

In addition to the range of writing backgrounds represented by these authors, *Taaqtumi* offers an array of genre experiments. Although all contributions fit comfortably under the ‘horror’ label, they range from spooky to gory, supernatural to realist, playful to serious, and many points in between. There are elements of fantasy, science fiction, apocalyptic adventure, climate fiction, and classic ‘creature feature’ at play. Indeed, not least among *Taaqtumi*’s pleasures is its reminder of what a rich and varied world is encompassed within horror literature. However, while these writers employ a variety of tones, storytelling techniques, and nods to diverse horror subgenres, they all offer material particularly suited to analysis through an ecoGothic lens. Though the stories collected in *Taaqtumi* differ markedly, all are engaged with Arctic creatures, weather, terrain, and ecosystems. Each in its own way examines humans reckoning with foreboding nonhuman forces.

The collection begins with Aviaq Johnston’s *‘Iqsinaqtutalik Piqtuq: The Haunted Blizzard’*, a story centred on a young heroine sent home from school in a winter storm. Johnston’s understated suspense is reminiscent of Ray Bradbury’s ‘The Wind’ (1942), another piece of fiction that renders weather much more frightening than we usually give it credit for. It exemplifies the unsettling agency of nonhuman actors, which has been both a frequent source of fright in ecohorror and a consistent focus of ecoGothic theory. Similar themes also come up in ‘The Door’ by Ann R. Loverock, which makes great use of seeming mundanity rendered unsettling by context. In this case, a doorway to nowhere is placed eerily in the tundra—‘standing alone, unfixed to the landscape’ (p. 16). The collision of this constructed artefact with an environment otherwise (apparently) devoid of humans creates powerful, uncanny imagery. The door is mysterious and we never learn who fashioned it or for what purpose, so its symbolic potential is uncertain. However, for readers interested in ecohorror, this story may conjure unsettling questions about the agency and power of objects, especially human-made ones.

Richard Van Camp’s ‘Wheetago War II: Summoners’ is not set in our reality, but rather in a post-apocalyptic future. Nevertheless, it clearly has relevance for today. In Van Camp’s story, survivors in the high Arctic band together to fend off evil humanoids called Wheetago; these beings are reminiscent of zombies, but Van Camp also summons suggestions of climate horror:

‘Earth had seven billion humans before the Wheetago returned, right? I think that was the magic number. I think they warmed the world and unthawed themselves from whatever Hell they came from. I think seven billion was the magic number for the food they’d need to make the world maggoty with them and their kind’ (p. 30).

As this passage suggests, Van Camp keeps his commentary on climate open to interpretation. His narrator evokes rising temperatures as a threat linked to a burgeoning human population, but how exactly humans, Wheetago, and global warming are linked through causality is ambiguous. Meanwhile, K. C. Carthew demonstrates a different approach to cli-fi. Her story ‘Sila’ features no magic or monsters, but instead depicts a family going out for a day of ice-fishing. All seems innocently pleasant, until the appearance of an Arctic predator hunting outside its expected range. The effects of melting ice are thus responsible for the element of horror in her narrative—a dangerous situation which could occur in reality any day now. One commonality between Van Camp’s and Carthew’s stories is their matter-of-fact treatment of the warming Arctic. Neither author attempts to persuade climate change deniers, or to graphically depict ecological shifts. Rather, they take the reality of climate change as a jumping off point to begin imagining their frightening stories.

‘Utiqtuq’ by Gayle Kabloona engages neither a dystopic future nor alarming current events, but instead looks to the past for its source of darkness. Although it is a zombie story, the most frightening peril Kabloona explores turns out to be a revival of government practices that are all too reminiscent of the colonial history that forced countless Indigenous children into assimilationist boarding schools. As scholars such as Alanna F. Bondar (2013) have demonstrated, the legacy of colonisation which continues to impact Indigenous peoples is a potent illustration of how social and environmental justice intersect. Kabloona’s story is one of several in this anthology that focuses on Indigenous characters living off the land, relying on traditional ecological knowledge and subsistence practices (which were nearly lost through assimilationist policies) in order to forge relationships with an ecosystem that has the potential to either furnish or destroy human life.

Taaqtumi offers an exciting entry to the movement of Indigenous futurism. Indigenous artists creating alternative pasts, presents, and futures have been building this body of art across genres and media. Canada in particular has seen a surge of work by Indigenous creators drawing on science fiction and horror; Jeff Barnaby's zombie film *Blood Quantum* (2019) and Cherie Dimaline's post-apocalyptic YA novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) are two examples among many.¹ *Taaqtumi* sits comfortably alongside such texts, and it collects a varied assortment of approaches to how sinister fiction might be used to explore topics with a pressing relevance across the Arctic. What's more, these are topics which continue to grow more urgent, as polar ecosystems shift, species migrate north, Indigenous knowledge and languages are lost, diseases and blights spread, and other dangers which might seem to belong to fantastic horror narratives become lived realities for already vulnerable communities. *Taaqtumi* presents a critical approach to ecohorror and ecoGothic. As so many writers have before, it explores the frightening potential of interactions between humans and the ecosystems they inhabit, but in doing so through the eyes of Indigenous artists, it radically challenges our assumptions. Many of the authors most associated with the Arctic have been outsiders. *Taaqtumi* proves that if there are any writers capable of capturing the threats of Northern ecosystems—and capable of using them to tell unique stories and probe pressing issues—it will be the people who actually live in those cold, dark regions.

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¹ Jeff Barnaby is interviewed by Tiffany Hearsey in this issue of *Gothic Nature* and Jennifer Schell reviewed *The Marrow Thieves* in the first issue of the journal.

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