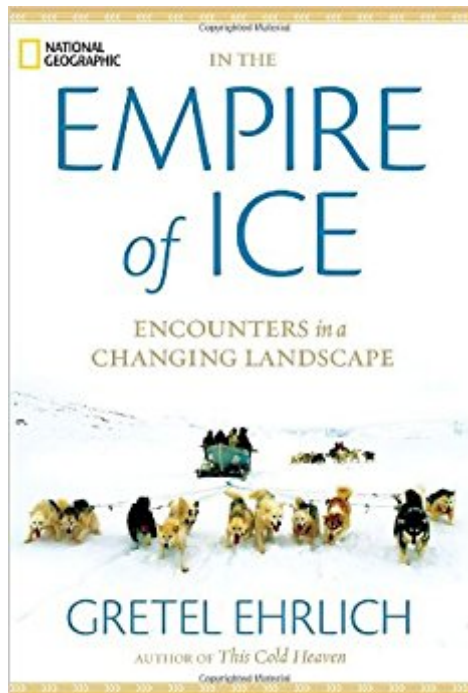




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# In The Empire Of Ice: Encounters In A Changing Landscape



## Synopsis

In this gripping circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle, Gretel Ehrlich paints a vivid portrait of the indigenous cultures that inhabit the starkly beautiful boreal landscape surrounding the Arctic Ocean, an ice-bound wilderness that includes northern Siberia, northwestern Greenland, Canada's vast Nunavut, and northern Alaska. Ehrlich's expedition, supported by the National Geographic Society, documents what remains of these cultures, specifically the similarities and differences among them, including hunting traditions, shamanic and ceremonial practices, languages and legends; the ways in which they have survived, or have been assimilated, and how they are adapting to the impact of climate change on their ice-age cultures. Ehrlich is fascinated by what she calls the ecology of culture; the ways in which the human presence of indigenous Arctic people is intricately interwoven with land, rock, river, sea, and ice. Depicting human-caused climate change as only the latest and most destructive of the ills and abuses first peoples have been suffering for 250 years, Ehrlich's haunting and lovely prose portrays ancient tribes and traditions on the edge of extinction and captures the austere beauty of their various lifeways in the frozen dreamscape of the world they have always known.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In her third and most wrenching ice chronicle, Ehrlich reports on her recent National Geographic Expeditions circumpolar journey within a mosaic containing shards of the grim history of the conquest of the Arctic, empathic portraits of indigenous people, scientific findings, and personal reflections. Ehrlich makes it crystal clear why the demise of Arctic culture will affect us all in

this deeply knowledgeable and beautifully composed elegy to a “ruined paradise.”

Booklist Starred Review

Gretel Ehrlich is well known for her prize-winning essays, fiction, and poetry. Her acclaimed 2002 book *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland* chronicled the first years of a lasting fascination with the high latitudes. Her work has also appeared in many anthologies including: *Best Essays of the Century*, *Best American Essays*, and *Best Travel Writing*.

As with all of Erlich's books, *IN THE EMPIRE OF ICE* is written in a narrative which is almost poetic, the images she draws are visceral and her tale gripping. I recommend this book highly to anyone who has a concern about what climate change is doing to the worlds of ice and snow and the people who live there. You would also be well served to look up her other books and add them to your bookshelf because they are works you will want to turn to often.

Gretel Erlich far exceeded anyone's expectations with this book. Just read the jacket, then the intro. Then buy the book. When done, give it away to someone who will read it. I suppose we could all do this -- tour the inhabited neighborhoods of the North Pole, visiting the remaining inhabitants and studying the changes of the environment that behaves like a sacred echo chamber -- magnifying the impacts of what the rest of us are doing in lower latitudes. The stark reality is that it takes someone like Gretel to get our attention. We must learn from this. We don't get a do over. Congratulations.

This writer writes travelogues for the soul. I cannot recommend her books highly enough.

I always look forward to reading Gretel Ehrlich. She is a very thoughtful, beautiful writer. A great book to read, but National Geographic should have used higher quality paper. The paper is barely above newspaper quality. Why?

Gretel Erlich with poetry and love writes of the imperiled cultures living on the ice, doomed now by our carelessness. Her book is important, urgent and beautiful.

Gretel Ehrlich pushes all the right buttons of those of us who yearn for a more authentic relationship to nature which we believe our hunter-gatherer ancestors had. Her exquisite book, *"This Cold Heaven,"* captured elements of the life of the Inuit of northwest Greenland who hunt using dogsleds.

They outlawed snowmobiles. In this book she makes a plea for the peoples of the north for whom global warming seems to be destroying the remnants of their traditional ways of subsistence. She illustrates this in the cases of four different peoples: those of the Bering straight, some reindeer herders above the arctic circle east of Archangel, Russia, the Eskimos of Melville Inlet, Canada and her familiar Greenlanders. Except for ice covered Melville Inlet global warming is changing their lives. Although global warming is undoubtedly transforming the north (where I hang out each summer at 58 degrees north in British Columbia the growing season has increased by almost 50 days and the glaciers are retreating) there are many other factors affecting these natives. The primary one is the impact of civilization with its diseases, cultural influences, commerce and technology. Beginning in the nineteenth century disease decimated peoples, religion and law boxed them in, trade drew them into a world of cash and technology offered an easier life. This is no different than other indigenous people around the world. Then there is alcohol. The people of Bering straight have managed to maintain some fishing and hunting, and now that the cold war is over, can connect with their relatives in Russia. The small group of reindeer herders Ehrlich serendipitously ends up with are single men who do not want to live in town and claim they stick with reindeer because they love the life and need to support their aging mothers who have always lived with the herds. They go to town to get drunk and laid, and will fade into history because, like the Shakers, they are not reproducing themselves. Because ice jams down the Gulf of Boothia, the Melville peninsula folk question global warming and still hunt. But Ehrlich focuses on the decadence of town, to which the Canadian government forced people to move and to which they were drawn because of health services and goods. In town there is terrible drunkenness and the effects of residential schools to which an older generations were forced to go where they were prohibited from using their native tongue and subjected to abuse. Those schools created more abuse and violence. Maybe the largest impact of civilization is the fact that the young are not interested in the old ways. (If it is like the communities I know, young people would rather watch TV and have little sense of work or are willing to experience any discomfort.) Further, by using snowmobiles, hunters require cash, forcing them further into dependency on civilization. Ehrlich's real heroes are her friends in Greenland with whom she spent so much time traveling on their dogsleds. They are increasingly less able to maintain their way of life as the ice recedes or is not thick enough to support them. She loves these people and laments the passing of their means of subsistence. She is both romantic and sentimental. At one point a group of hunters moves further north where ice is more dependable. They gave up their attempts there because they ran out of sugar and coffee, narcotics of civilization. That is it in a nutshell. Industrial civilization has both terrible consequences on the environment and

offers seductions that few native peoples have been able to resist. And anyway how many people are we talking about? Less than 50,000? The Greenland government wants to extract resources. Many Alaska Eskimos want more oil development. The handfuls that live a past existence are fighting a losing battle with nature and themselves. It is a tragedy but desertification south of the Sahara is far more devastating, affecting hundreds of thousands more people, leading to genocide and ethnic cleansing. We can also ask ourselves what was it like for Greenlanders when the weather warmed up considerably at the time Eric the Red established farming communities on Greenland. Did the then indigenous Dorset cultures find themselves deprived because of retreating ice or is it only the Thules arriving from the West in the 16th century with their dogs, whose lifestyle is no longer sustainable because the ice no longer supports their sleds. I don't know. But the answers might put Ehrlich's lament more in perspective. I too had fantasies about living primitively from the land. That is not in the cards. Global warming contributes to it but many other factors need to be taken into account. I am with you Gretel. I think we need to pluck the heart strings of a world which doesn't see the losses caused by civilization but there is no retreat. The answer lies elsewhere. I no longer know what that may be. Thank you for your book. Charlie Fisher author of *Â Dismantling Discontent: Buddha's Way Through Darwin's World*

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