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Memories of Abuse and Life in Greenland



ON THE NOVEL *KALAK* BY KIM LEINE

Greenland stirs the imagination of Danes. Several Danish authors, such as Henrik Pontoppidan (1857-1943), Thorkild Hansen (1927-1989) and Jørn Riel (1931-), have written stories and novels set in Greenland. These publications do not just demonstrate the Danish fascination with their (former) colony, but also the fact that to this day Greenland and Denmark are closely connected, for example by Danish labour in Greenland and Greenlandic migrants in Denmark.

In 1992 this Danish-Greenlandic bond brought us the very popular, and arguably the first Danish postcolonial novel by Peter Høeg, *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (Smilla's Sense of Snow). According to eskimologist Kirsten Thisted, such Danish writings are not examples of Greenlandic literature, but of Danish Greenlandic literature. Whereas the former is written by Greenlanders themselves, the latter is written by Danes. Kim Leine's novel *Kalak* (2007) is a recent and stirring example of Danish literature on Greenland.

Kalak, however, is not merely another example of Danish Greenlandic literature. The novel offers the reader fascinating impressions of small Greenlandic villages in beautiful surroundings, of the capital Nuuk and its rapid growth. Of Greenlanders, and also of Danes in Greenland. Of murder, suicide and alcoholism. And it describes the division between Denmark and Greenland. In fact, the novel describes normal everyday life in Greenland. But *Kalak* offers more. It is first and foremost, as Kim Leine emphasized in a TV interview in the Danish book programme *Bøger i virkeligheden* (Books in Reality), a story about abuse. The major themes are sex, women, alcohol and drug abuse. All seen through the eyes of a 'kalak' – a 'real' or 'shitty' Greenlandic. An admiring compliment and an insult at the same time, and Kim, the novel's main character, is called exactly that.

Kim Leine was born in Norway in 1961, moved to Denmark at the age of seventeen and worked in Greenland as a nurse for 15

years. In 2004 he returned to Denmark and wrote his debut novel *Kalak*. The front page states that *Kalak* is a memoir novel. As such *Kalak* is 'the' story about Leine's own life. And what a life it is. The novel recalls memories of a strict childhood in Norway amongst Jehovah's Witnesses, years in Copenhagen with an abusive homosexual father, but most of all memories of life in Greenland. After finishing nursing school, Kim moves with his wife Lærke and two children to Greenland. In Nuuk Kim goes to work, is eager to learn Greenlandic and, unlike his countrymen, socialises with Greenlanders. Kim enjoys life in Greenland, but his marriage is under pressure. Kim starts having affairs with Greenlandic women. And Lærke accepts this. He ends up in an eternal triangle, from work he goes straight home to put his children to bed and to kiss Lærke goodnight, then on to his mistress and the next morning back to work. The move to an East Greenlandic village does not change Kim's lifestyle. Back in Denmark, Kim is restless. Working in Denmark is far less exciting because in Greenland circumstances forced him to be psychiatrist, doctor and nurse all in one. In Greenland he was his work. He decides to return to Greenland and leaves Lærke and his children behind.

This is the beginning of a period in which Kim wanders between several places in Greenland and Denmark. He divorces Lærke and continues to see several women. He does not want to – or cannot – commit to anyone. Murders and suicides, the death of one of his lovers, his indecisiveness between Denmark and Greenland, and particularly his troublesome past all start haunting him. Kim starts drinking, but finds real relief in drugs. Sharp descriptions of his addiction, his lies, tricks and easy access to drugs follow. His downfall comes gradually, but it has serious consequences. He is deported to Denmark, but pulls through. And then it starts all over again.

Kalak is an intense life story. Unsympathetic as the main character occasionally is, the narrative feels real and honest. *Kalak* is not just a novel about Greenland, it is more. An easy-to-read novel that sticks in one's memory and makes one realise what extremes life can hold.