



The Greenlanders

Jane Smiley

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Pulitzer Prize winner and bestselling author Jane Smiley's **The Greenlanders** is an enthralling novel in the epic tradition of the old Norse sagas. Set in the fourteenth century in Europe's most farflung outpost, a land of glittering fjords, blasting winds, sun-warmed meadows, and high, dark mountains, **The Greenlanders** is the story of one family—proud landowner Asgeir Gunnarsson; his daughter Margret, whose willful independence leads her into passionate adultery and exile; and his son Gunnar, whose quest for knowledge is at the compelling center of this unforgettable book. Jane Smiley takes us into this world of farmers, priests, and lawspeakers, of hunts and feasts and long-standing feuds, and by an act of literary magic, makes a remote time, place, and people not only real but dear to us.

The Greenlanders Details

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Author : Jane Smiley

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From Reader Review The Greenlanders for online ebook

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

The Greenlanders is an exceptionally well-written bit of historical fiction, detailing the little-known history of the Norse settlement in Greenland from the mid-14th to early-15th century. While the story focuses primarily on one family, there is no real protagonist, and the narrative slips in and out of the lives of many members of the small community.

Smiley (no relation of mine, sadly!) consciously adopts the style of an oral epic, paying attention to the rhythm of the prose and repeating certain phrases ("It was the case that. . ."). But there are other consequences of this style as well: there's a certain emotional distance from all the characters, who play their roles in the story but let little of their personalities or emotions shine through, compared to characters in most modern novels. There's also a certain lack of explanations and description, which, while I understand that it was a deliberate choice, bothered me somewhat: it's another way of keeping the reader at a distance.

Which isn't to say that this isn't an enjoyable or absorbing book, by any means. I wouldn't call it a "page-turner," but still didn't want to put it down once I got into it. Not surprisingly, a lot happens in the book, with major events often treated with great detachment, as there's just so much to get through. Memory and the passage of time are dealt with quite a bit; we see events that happened early in the book become legends, while other early events are forgotten about completely and disbelieved when someone mentions them half a century later. We're also witnesses to the slow decline of the Greenlander civilization: before the beginning of the book, one of the two settlements has already been abandoned, and the Greenlanders fold in on themselves more and more as time progresses. Their detachment from European civilization, and the little that we do hear about Europe in the book, provide an interesting backdrop to their daily struggles.

As a literary book, I suppose this one is meant to be able to be interpreted in many different ways, and it's interesting to see how other people here have interpreted it quite differently from me: for instance, I saw the native population as being quite minor and Smiley as deliberately downplaying their role. The "skraelings" remain an enigma, with characters telling us about them far more than we actually see them.

At any rate, I found this to be an admirable book, although I'd advise people to read the preview before ordering it, as it's not for everyone. I round down to four stars not because I found the book to be flawed, but because I found the level of detachment to be a bit much. I understand that the Greenlanders expressed very little, and that they would have found no need to explain things about their culture when they didn't realize that things could be any other way; but the book was neither narrated by, written by or written for ancient Greenlanders, and this kept the book from being as memorable as it otherwise might have been. Still, overall an excellent piece of literature.

Anna says

Although I struggled to stick with this book in the first 100+ pages, but I had read really good reviews on it so I stuck with it. Soon I was hooked and I am glad I did. The most interesting aspect of this story was the influence the Greenland's relative isolation had on their morals and religious beliefs. The oral preservation of laws that tried to maintain their original ties to other norther countries maintained some continuity until lawspeaker Bjorn failed to pass them on and even failed. As I read through the generations, I could see different families "value" and role in their community grow and diminish based on the actions of choices they made. This was interesting because less individual value was assigned than in our culture. Always they

had a national identity that values supported, always family identity, and after the church lost power and the lawspeaker was murdered, the divided into regions defined by wealth. This was fascinating. I am going to read another Icelandic novel, but I will miss Margaret Gunnardottir!

Mia says

I loved this book--really, really loved it, didn't want it to end. Since I can't abide Jane Smiley's other books* I couldn't figure how I would so love one but so hate the others. I was literally afraid to read it again, fearing that I might notice on the second reading loathesome qualities I'd missed the first time around, that I'd read shallowly and under the influence of my love for Sigrid Undsett's *Kristen Lavransdatter*, which I also loved.

But after years and years of this wondering and worrying, I read an interview with Smiley in which she said she felt like she *channeled* Greenlanders, she didn't really write it, not the way she had written her others. Oh, happy day. I felt free to love Greenlanders again.

* I really have tried. I read that dreadful novel about real estate and her memoir about owning racehorses, not just the obvious stuff like *A Thousand Acres* and *Moo*. No go.

Elizabeth Urello says

I loved this book so much! As with all books I really love, I can't say exactly why it was so absorbing. A lot happens, but not in a page-turning way, it's not funny at all, and while you do come to know and care about the characters, they are held at a certain remove from the reader. But it's nearly 600 pages of awesomeness about a lost society I'd never had any interest in before, and I loved every word of it. It's about endurance and survival in a hostile landscape, in which human emotions - love, grief, rage, passion - are yet another inevitable, uncontrollable storm to be weathered. In Greenland, if the famine doesn't kill you, a love affair surely will.

Sarah says

I really really wanted to read this book - I generally like Jane Smiley's work, and its historical fiction! About Northern Europe no less!

But in the end it was just...ponderous and dull. And frankly, I couldn't care less about any of the characters - not the unfaithful wife, the family she left behind, the crazy priest...not anyone. They were just all so dull. Even as Smiley so painstakingly - in so much detail - talked about the harshness of their life and their winters I still didn't care.

(and she never did really quite get the idea of being an oathbreaker!)

samantha says

I really don't even remember when I read this book... that said, it was one of the most beautiful books I've

read. Jane Smiley is an expert in Icelandic literature and sagas, which I know she once taught at University of Iowa (she may still). She chooses to use the prose style of these epic sagas to write her own saga of 14th c Vikings attempting to colonize Greenland. This makes it a bit difficult to get into right at first, but just like with any writing style, you quickly adjust. Just give it some time - you will be well-rewarded for your patience.

Another aspect of this book that I love is that her knowledge of the subject allows her to really show us what it must have been like to be there, living day to day within the Viking culture permeated by the hardships of Greenland. This is one well-researched book (well, like all of Smiley's work!) concerning the details and minutiae of the period! A must for history buffs

David says

For a modern book, this struck me as a lot like the old icelandic/greenlandic stories that I've read. Of course, that is both good and bad as far as my personal tastes go. I cannot fault the characterization, depth of detail, or scope. However, it just goes on and on and on and on and on. You sometimes see entire lives in a couple of pages, but that's only a tiny portion. It is extremely dense, but I have to wonder if some of that could have been cut. It makes it seem more like the old Norse tales, but much seems to be removable without affecting the story. It's just a bunch of farmers and hunters in a remote, inhospitable place. Sure, this is their unique story, but do I need to know exactly how much each family tithed each time? The detailing gets a bit overwhelming at times. I swear that a thousand years passes, even though only a few generations are involved. Still, other than the sense of having to slog through this one a bit, I still did like it a great deal.

Bettie? says

This is a convincing and masterly fictional account about eking out a life on mediaeval Greenland. If you prefer non-fiction then Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed is your best source.

As with Sigrid Undset's 'Kristin Lavransdatter' trilogy, 'Greenlanders' is written in oral-epic-saga mode so it didn't surprise me at all to find a character called Birgitter Lavransdottir (hattip?). Now for the *gasp* statement - I am already (100 pages in) enjoying this more than the eternal hanky-wringing pity-fest of Undset's storyline.

Opening - **ASGEIR GUNNARSSON FARMED AT GUNNARS STEAD near Undir Hofdi church in Austford.**

From wiki: *The Little Ice Age (LIA) was a period of cooling that occurred after the Medieval Warm Period (Medieval Climate Optimum). While not a true ice age, the term was introduced into the scientific literature by François E. Matthes in 1939. It is conventionally defined as a period extending from the 16th to the 19th centuries, though climatologists and historians working with local records no longer expect to agree on either the start or end dates of this period, which varied according to local conditions. NASA defines the term as a cold period between 1550 AD and 1850 AD and notes three particularly cold intervals: one beginning about 1650, another about 1770, and the last in 1850, each separated by intervals of slight warming.*

Diana says

This is very different from the other Jane Smiley books I've read. I'm knocked out that she can write in such different styles, and I loved this book.

Norse people settled on Greenland for about four hundred years, until the Little Ice Age made it impossible for them to survive there in about 1400. I was surprised when, about a hundred pages in, I found myself getting completely absorbed in this book and its world. It's told in what can seem like a kind of flat style, maybe like Saga stories from Iceland, and there are over a hundred characters with crazy Viking names, so sometimes it's hard to remember who is who. Life was so bleak and violent, and all of the sudden, a character I'd come to care about would get crushed in the ice, starve to death, die in childbirth, or be bloodily murdered. I got caught up in the rhythms of survival in the north, the spring seal hunt, the short summer of constant hard work, the fall seal hunt, Yule, the hungry time of the year. I have a big weakness for historical fiction, and Greenland is such an alien and interesting place. Plus, it's like reading about the Donner Party or that guy who went up to Alaska and wound up having his story turned into *Into the Wild*-- you know they're doomed, and it's interesting seeing how it's going to play out.

Roaldeuller says

Note: this is a personal and somewhat rambling review.

The *Greenlanders* was one of the great reading experiences of my adult life, and I have to confess that "great" reading experiences have become few and far between the older and more jaded I get. I had heard of the book for several years prior, and I knew that at some point, the time would ripe. I find that certain books reward a structured, self conscious approach to being read, *The Greenlanders* being a case in point. I am not sure why, it certainly isn't rational (another example was Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*). Most books I pick up and start reading immediately, but for certain others, I feel the need to anticipate and postpone.

In this instance, I purchased a used hardback through an Amazon partner. When it arrived it was pleasingly large and heavy with a clear plastic cover protecting the jacket. The cover artwork is excellent, and the bookseller had included an additional bonus of a postcard version of the cover (or perhaps this was included by the publisher - in any case it made a great bookmark!) I set the book aside for several weeks on my bedside table to let the idea of it grow in my mind, occasionally picking it up just to enjoy the heft, and eventually, the time was right and I dove in.

When I did start to read it I was immediately captivated. It is not an easy read as some reviewers have pointed out. The prose style is that of an actual Norse or Scandinavian saga, the dialog can seem stilted, and the overall tone is stylized, spare, and stark. Smiley frequently reuses certain phrases - "there came a time" for example - reinforcing the sense that one is listening to an oral story. The characters can be difficult to keep track of. Simple events (harvests, meals) are described with the same dispassionate tone as murder. If you read quickly or skim at all, you can miss vital developments.

Despite its challenges, *The Greenlanders* richly rewards a reader's efforts. After the first few pages, I had sunk into it's mood, my inner ear adapting to the pacing and style of the prose, surrendering to the almost Biblical voice. I have a similar reaction to Shakespeare or Melville - difficult at first, but then as I get accustomed to the rhythm, it is as though I enter a different world. So as to not spoil the plot, I will say only

that the story is truly epic in scope, covering decades and taking the character(s) from youth to old age. By the time I was finished, after several late nights of reading, I felt as though I were emerging from a dream. Images from the book remain with me, still vivid in my brain a year later.

I am generally a fan of Jane Smiley, although I must admit that I prefer her less popular books (Moo, Horse Heaven) to her blockbusters (Thousand Acres). The Greenlanders definitely falls among the former. Highly recommended.

Rhian says

This may be my new favorite novel. It was hard going at first, but Smiley's strange, impersonal way of telling the story really got under my skin. I read it six months ago and it still comes to mind constantly.

What did I like about it? The pared-down world of the Greenlanders, the subtly wrought characters, specific, gorgeous detail, and the emotion, which was somehow both stifled and explosive. There is something incredibly moving about their painful struggle to survive and their ultimate failure.

Love, love, love it.

Meg says

What makes this book unique is also what makes it unapproachable: Namely, it was written in the style of a Scandinavian epic, which is a departure from the narrative graces we're used to. At first, this causes it to seem anecdotal and choppy, and I had a hard time getting into it. After I became immersed in the characters and their lives, however, it quickly gathered momentum and drew me in. Though it follows a large cast of characters, I did not find myself yearning for more attention to some and less to others. This was a compelling novel with sympathetic characters that illustrated a lifestyle and hardships very different from those of modern times. Don't be turned off by the chosen framework.

Andrew says

This books begins with a strong premise, and interesting humanity-versus-nature story chronicling the decline of a settlement in Greenland, circa fifteenth-sixteenth century.

It would seem that whomever is responsible for editing this book needs to review basic paragraph structure and narrative flow. Jane Smiley patches snippets of dialogue and multi-year story events together between characters that may only appear once or twice.

The character relationships are especially murky, due to the Norwegian method of naming. For example, if you are the male son of Thor, your name would be Thorson. This becomes compounded by the cyclic character naming spread out over many multi-generational stories. For example, there are two Ivar Asgeirsons and two Asgeir Ivarsons... with scant contextual notes as to which is being discussed. Take a few dozen Norwegian first names, add lots of death, disease, and famine, blend on high, and see how they

recombine over the course of approximately 70 years. A clear mental path to trace their individual threads, must involve lots of sticky notes and flipping back and forth. Or a very very good memory for names without context.

The paragraph structure was the worst part. The roughly interwoven story lines move through two to six page long paragraphs. Breaks between the story snippets are often only punctuated with phrasing such as "And another thing that happened...", with the occasional, and very inconsistent, paragraph break. The inconsistency of the change in narrator, story thread, and notation of time frame, made this book extremely frustrating to follow, and the interrelation of numerous side characters baffling.

This could have been a pleasantly dry story with a large cast of characters, but due to its structural difficulties, is very frustrating to follow. After many instances of flipping back and forth trying to remember who did what and how it applied to the current story thread, I decided to give up. It is possible that a reader who has the luxury to read this book in one sitting may be able to maintain the myriad narrative threads for long enough to find a cohesive story line. I lack the patience for this particular book.

This is the first Jane Smiley book I have read. It seems dramatically different in depth of dialogue and character relationships than described by some of her fans. I am unsure if this is one of her early works, before she had much of her structure worked out, or if this book might be a fluke. I give this story a big thumbs down, with the hope that her other stories prove more rewarding to the reader.

Melissa says

I really wanted to like this book, to continue my months long delve into medieval historical fiction. I read about fifty pages in and could not take it any more. This book is very dry. It reads like an account from a very boring town gossip (this person was the son of this person, went to this person's farm, did this, the other person said this, years later this happened, blah blah blah). Fifty pages in and one of the "major" characters (according to the back of the book) dies, and I couldn't care less. No character development. Endless blathering. I cannot believe this book got so many good reviews. There is much better historical fiction out there!

Rosamund says

Can't help wondering whether those giving high ratings are simply scared to undermine all the massive amounts of research that must have gone into this. I can totally imagine it being some people's thing, of course, but it's just so... slow. Not a shred of gratification anywhere. From a writer's perspective it's a commendable feat, but it's not readable.

It does have bursts of humour in places where you'd least expect it:

"When she passed a birch tree, she said, "Little birch tree, little birch tree, what dost thou here alone? Once I ate thy leaves, unboiled and unroasted." And the prince looked at her and said, "What?" and she said, "Nothing. I was only thinking of Princess Thorunn."

Unfortunately, these moments are not enough to carry the book along and make it human enough to care about characters. Of which, by the way, there are many. Not all of them are even named in the "helpful" list at the front of the book. (BTW, what is it about the fantasy / historical fiction genre that requires inordinate,

faceless characters?)

I suppose I was expecting something I could really sit down and tackle during the winter months, something I'd be dying to get stuck into again every time I picked it up. Instead, the only thing I think I got out of it was confirmation that living in Greenland in the Dark Ages is every bit as bleak as you would picture it being. I probably would watch this if it was adapted for TV, but as a reader, my needs are vastly different.

Jessica says

What a truly amazing book. Written in a style reminiscent of the Norse sagas, beautifully detailed and epic in scale, this is the only book I've ever found that captures what it must have been like to live in one of the farflung Viking colonies of the Middle Ages. Greenland is a terribly inhospitable place, but I had no idea how inhospitable before I read this. They were completely unable to cultivate any fruits or vegetables or wheat. Their diet consisted of meat, from both wild and domesticated animals, cheese, milk, butter and perhaps some wild berries or herbs in the summer. They buttered dried meat to soften it, and made communion wafers out of dried, powdered seaweed mixed with water!

There is an almost claustrophobic feel to the book: they are trapped on this harsh land, never knowing when a ship might come from Norway, and if it would bring any supplies. Their bishops and priests die off, no one can replace them so they are dying unshriven and their marriages go unsanctioned (these are a deeply religious people). Even their lawspeakers die out, so there is no one to mediate disputes or prosecute crimes. Famines come and there is no way to send for help . . . it's a heartbreaking book.

I could go on for hours, but instead I'll simply urge you: read it!

Alesa says

You don't just read this book. You LIVE it. Who would have thought that the lives of Scandinavian settlers in medieval Greenland could be so fascinating. Life was so hard and brutal. Both the culture and the climate were totally unforgiving. But it's fascinating to see how our forebearers lived, and how much of stoic Scandinavian culture remains in families of that heritage today.

The author, Jane Smiley, is an author of stunning brilliance. She carries you to another time and place, such that you feel you're in the minds and souls of the people back then. I didn't know that Greenland was eventually abandoned by the Icelandic and Norwegian settlers in the 1400s. But this book got me into doing research, and learning about the history of the colony there. The book also makes you think about climate change, and how even small variations (little the Little Ice Age) can have drastic effects on human settlements.

This book wasn't exactly fun to read. Rather, it was 100% absorbing. If you loved Kristin Lavransdatter, then this is a must read.

Christopher Howard says

My favorite books are the books that I read at the right time. Do those things happen or do we make them

happen in our minds? Bitin off more than I can chew about this and that and Beowulf and Salomé and then someone inserts Icelandic sagas and Christian influences—thanks for trying to make some sense of what I'm attempting to say—and then I go off talking about that and then someone says no, Catholic influences and Tolkein and the Apocrypha and hey, are you going to Easter Mass? Well—there's a very good chance of that because I just can't say no to someone who's a historical scholar of some Protestant faith I didn't catch, and I don't feel like disagreeing with her that Jesus's word is the Truth because that's a can of apocrypha I don't even know how to approach, I'm just a skræling over here for lack of lexicon rowing in my skin boat through a fjord of conscious unconsciousness.

Jack Massa says

You think you got problems? Try living in Norse Greenland in the Little Ice Age. If you don't kill enough seals at the autumn hunt, you and your family might starve over the winter. That is if you don't die of the "vomiting ill" or get axe-murdered by a neighbor over some stupid feud. Geez.

This prodigious novel reads sometimes like a fantasy, the culture and everyday lives of the people being so strange. And at times like a "lost colony" SF novel, the community so isolated that a ship from Europe arrives only once every ten years or so (and when it does, it's a mixed blessing).

But mostly it reads like the Icelandic sagas that author Jane Smiley seems to have deliberately used as her model: rich interwoven story lines, fierce and stoical characters, straightforward prose that never rises from its matter-of-fact tone no matter how harsh or horrendous the events it tells.

I found the book slow at first, but eventually got caught up in all the strangeness and the fates of the characters. (And boy, are they fated!)

A profound, high-quality historical novel. Not recommended if you're already depressed.

Chrissie says

I recommend this book to those of you seeking immersion into the world of medieval Greenland. The characters are the Nordic immigrants who settled in Greenland, the events taking place in the 1300s, centuries after Viking exploration. These people must cope with cold and a native population that is so strange that these creatures are seen as demons. These people, the indigenous Inuits, are called skraelings. It is a world of hunger and hard times, adultery and murder, illness and death and lawlessness. Death, death and more death..... and of course religion. The Norwegians settled here to trade, to hunt and to farm. The Thing and the Bishop and his priests were the ultimate authority of power, and it isn't easy reading of their ways.

I have never run into the style of writing found in this book. To help you determine if you will enjoy it, I have included a quote:

Then she turned to Gunnar and declared that as a child of but fifteen years, Gunhild could not be asked to keep two things in her mind at once, namely the Thjodhilds Stead way and the Lavrans Stead way. And since one had to make way for the other, it was necessary that the old go out and the new come in. The result of this was that on the feast of St. Stephen, Gunhild and Gunnar went on skis across the fjord and over the hills

to Thjodhilds Stead, and Gunhild stayed there, as a maiden, and came home no more. And this was also the case, that in the disorder of departure, she never once looked over her shoulder, nor did she see her brother and sisters and mother waving aefter her, but she only went forward, looking for her new home, and this came to Birgitta as an unaccountable grief, no matter how she prayed and told herself that this was the pain of bearing daughters, and folk must always accustom themselves to it. (41%)

The language is different. There is an absence of dialog. There is a distance between the “storyteller” and the listener. There is a formality to expressions that reflects the atmosphere of the times. The reader is always looking on rather than partaking of the events. Nevertheless, as the story proceeds you very definitely come to care for the characters. When you read the above quote you feel the sorrow and grief of the mother who is losing her child – even though she reasons with herself that this is a step all mothers must take.

Although the events are tragic, there are also characters that are happy and satisfied with their lives. There are characters that will astound you with their strength, others with their individuality. There are couples that separate and take other spouses or women who manage alone. That is no small task. There is feuding and injustice and then there is kindness. There are neighbors who step in and help when they need not.

You will feel immersed in another world. You will understand what their life really was like. Mostly it was grim. You see their world with their eyes and their sensibilities. You come to understand how the skraelings could be dangerous; how the priests were worthy of respect and that sometimes one simply had to see that people were punished. If you didn't see this was done yourself, nobody else would. The Pulitzer prize-winning author, Jane Smiley, plops you down in another world where the mindset is initially completely foreign and strange. You come to think as they do. However, the book will not fit everyone. The writing takes getting use to and the characters are numerous. They are listed in the front. Don't expect a lot of laughs. Do expect total immersion in another time and place.

In my view this book deserves five stars for the author's ability to transport the reader to a completely foreign place and for that place to become real. I have chosen nevertheless to give it three stars because I personally had a hard time with the language style, even though it had to be exactly as it was to properly conjure that world. I did have trouble reading this book; I can only give it three stars.
