

Stupid, Evil, Queer

Last Night in Nuuk

By Niviaq Korneliussen, translated by Anna Halager

New York, NY; Black Cat, 2019, 192 pp., \$16.00, paperback

Reviewed by Noelle McManus

With just over 55,000 people living in Greenland, the odds of a Greenlandic novel making waves in the United States are low. The odds, then, of the author of this novel being under thirty and of the topic being that country's queer youth would appear to double or triple the odds. That said, the sophomore novel of Niviaq Korneliussen—an openly queer, twenty-nine-year-old Greenlandic—has broken into the US market. *Last Night in Nuuk* (translated from its original Danish by Anna Halager) delves deep within a culture most might be surprised to learn exists in her native country.

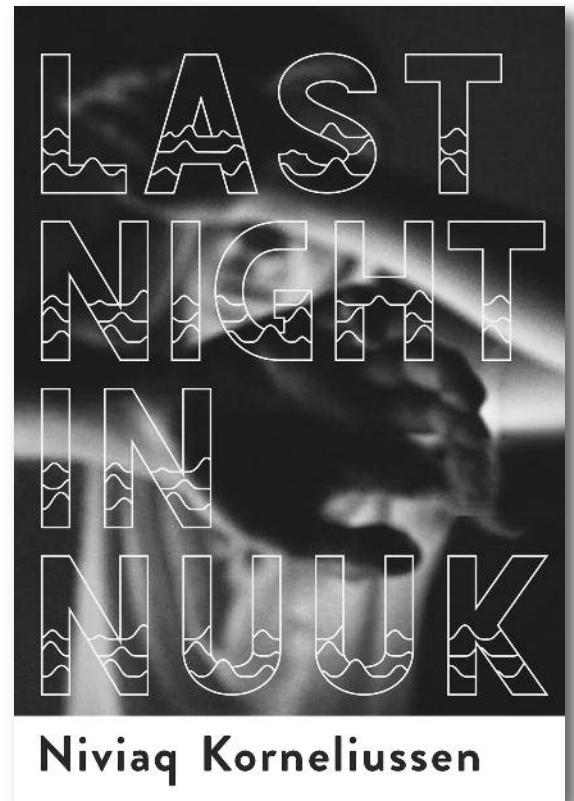
The book has no linear plot but rather consists of vignettes, near-voyeuristic snippets of the lives of five young people whose heartbreak and drama intersect, mainly in the tiny capital city of Nuuk. To orient readers, Korneliussen provides a list of the five main characters preceding the first chapter. We learn that Fia is Inuk's older sister and Arnaq's flat mate, that Arnaq and Inuk are best friends, and that Ivik and Sara are dating. The character list seems like overkill at first—how difficult can five characters be to keep track of?—but as the novel goes on, jumping back and forth between days, months, and countries, I found myself referring back frequently.

Fia leads the procession with a story about her sexual crisis. We meet her just as she has broken up with a dotting boyfriend for reasons she herself cannot explain, but she swears herself “off sausage.” In dense, meandering prose, she pines after Sara, whom she meets at a party and knows next to nothing about. Fia feels as though she is the only

person in the world struggling with something as weighty as heterosexual disappointment and bisexual questioning. Every friend she has—especially Arnaq, whose openness about her own sexuality borders on exhibitionism—seems comfortably settled into their adult identity. Fia teeters back and forth between anxious confusion and self-acceptance, struggling in her introversion among the flashing lights of Nuuk nightlife.

The perspective of her brother, Inuk, follows suit, in a prose style so different it could be construed as passages from another book. He writes odd, fragmented letters to no one, having fled to Denmark after his alleged involvement in a gay political scandal, which he swears he had nothing to do with. His words resemble those of someone's crazed relative on Facebook, unhinged homophobic and anti-Greenlandic rants interspersed with desperate messages to his loved ones. Rife with terror and self-loathing, Inuk's chapter stands out for its energy and bristling specificity. I could read an entire book just about him, never growing tired of the way he snaps between wise observations of the lonely Danish streets and near mental breakdown, writing messages like,

FUCKING QUEERS ARE SICK!
FUCKING QUEERS ARE CONTAGIOUS!
FUCKING QUEERS ARE FUCKING GREENLANDERS!
FUCKING QUEERS ARE SUBHUMAN!
FUCKING QUEERS MUST DIE!



Most of Inuk's woes stem from a public outing by Arnaq, left undisclosed until her own chapter. Her words are by far the bluntest of the group, Korneliussen's unwavering frankness piercing every line. Arnaq is a mess of the Hannah Horvath school: she drinks herself to unconsciousness; she flirts with people she doesn't want; she assesses her own body in painstaking detail. In fact, she describes the way she pukes, the way she pisses, and the way she shits—nothing being too much information. Despite her actions and the toll they begin to take on the other characters, she remains remorseless, harkening back to her past abuse to explain away any responsibility: “It's not my fault. It's my upbringing. I didn't do anything bad. I didn't do anything evil. My *dad* is the evil one. I don't abuse. I'm the victim here.”

Also feeling and denying guilt is Ivik, whose chapter revolves around a night spent cheating on her girlfriend, Sara, with energy-sucking Arnaq. Ivik's passage is rife with fear of abandonment that drives her to make choices she regrets immediately. What drives her anxiety is a looming cloud of dysphoria, one that Korneliussen describes sympathetically. “It doesn't hurt my fucking



Mads Pihl



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Niviaq Korneliussen

You're a Greenlander when you feel self-pity.

You're a Greenlander when you suffer from self-loathing. You're a Greenlander when you're full of anger. You're a Greenlander when you're a liar. You're a Greenlander when you're full of yourself. You're a Greenlander when you're stupid. You're a Greenlander when you're evil. You're a Greenlander when you're queer.

The novel is more documentary than drama. The tone is often so colloquial that it feels like listening to a friend ramble on about their day. Korneliussen has interspersed other modes of communication, like text messages and hashtags, that lend the work verisimilitude, although it is not always particularly pleasurable to read. Because she understands her subjects and their backgrounds, speech feels natural; problems are realistic; nothing is blown out of proportion nor shied away from. Even with all this effort towards realism and conversational tone, Korneliussen manages to display her literary prowess. Abbreviations and slang sit side-by-side with darkly fascinating lines like, “I vomit up hell itself, dragging out Pontius Pilate and all my intestines with it.”

Last Night in Nuuk has graphic sex, graphic language, and graphic just about everything else, and yet, at the end, none of it felt gratuitous. It's truthful, and while not built, it seems, for commercial success, it's an important portrayal of a group of people I might have gone through my whole life without considering once. *Last Night in Nuuk* is disquietingly human and startlingly you— which is, I think, everything that it set out to be.

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pussy,” Ivik admits, after months of being unable to sleep with her girlfriend. “But my soul is in pain. It's in distress. It's being abused.” Ivik, too, makes mistakes that form cracks in other characters' stories, but her chapter drips so heavily with regret that I found her far easier to empathize with. Where Arnaq is angry and abrasive, Ivik is timid and ashamed. Neither, however, seems to fully comprehend the consequences of her actions.

Sara's chapter completes the book. She narrates her days with soft, flowery language, describing with all the care of a poet the birth of her first niece, the deterioration of her relationship with Ivik, and her own thoughts on mortality. She emerges from the brunt of her struggles, it appears, the most intact of all the characters, and addresses her problems with matter-of-factness and self-deprecating wit. Lines like, “Dirty hands shouldn't touch. A polluted

soul shouldn't pollute others. A black heart shouldn't love,” are crisscrossed with sharp, simple inner dialogue, such as her frank reaction to seeing an online headline: “Lesbians never smile”: “You said it!”

If you're interested in a book where characters learn from their mistakes and grow as people, look elsewhere. Though I was frustrated by the tendency of the protagonists (especially Arnaq) to ignore their problems and carry on, I respect what I view to be Korneliussen's intent. *Last Night in Nuuk* is no great, satisfying bildungsroman, nor does it try to be. Korneliussen seeks to let readers in on a private, hidden culture in a remote land. We see who these characters are without much consolation. Perhaps Inuk, unbalanced as he is, describes it best in his jaded narration:

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