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Memoir of a misfit misanthrope in the Far North

"The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven"

Nathaniel Ian Miller, *Little, Brown and Company, 2021*

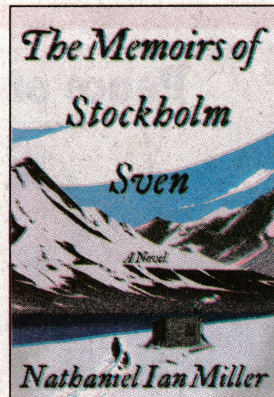
"A life," says Miller's fictional Stockholm Sven in the prologue to his memoir, "is substantially more curious, and mundane, than the reports would have it."

He speaks as somebody aware that "Stockholm Sven" has become

a myth: a misfit, a misanthrope, the victim of a mining accident, a superb, solitary hunter in "the farthest North." He is writing, he implies, to set the record straight.

He begins by skimming over the "death in progress" that was his life for his first 32 years as a barely-educated Swede who worked from boyhood in Stockholm's mills. His memoir begins in earnest in 1916, when his sister Olga, whose children he is helping to raise, reminds him of his obsession with the survival tales of the great Swedish polar explorers—and says she has seen advertisements for mining workers in Spitsbergen, an archipelago due north of Norway and only a few degrees south of the invisible north pole. He goes.

He finds not the romanticized land of his imagination, but Longyear, a mining town that has existed for 10 years under two sequential managing companies, and a place where civilization is "if not transparent, at least



translucent." Like other outposts in the far north, he says, Longyear is like a barnacle clinging to a rock, washed over again and again by a ravaging sea—only the "sea" is in fact people from different countries who bring their culture with them and then disappear, to be replaced by people of another country. He finds that mining is very like factory work, only darker. Many of the min-

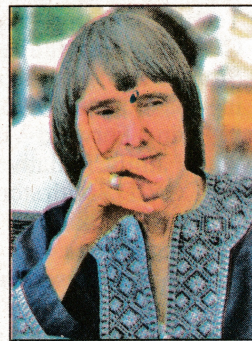
ers are Norwegian, and he speaks no language but Swedish. He sinks into despair, only to be rescued by Charles MacIntyre, a Scottish geologist who has heard the miners remark with horror of Sven's fondness for books. MacIntyre offers Sven friendship and, informally, the education of which his previous life has deprived him. All is well, until an avalanche falls upon Longyear, smashing the mine underneath; after being trapped unconscious hundreds of feet down, Sven is finally rescued, but the right side of his face is a mass of scar tissue, and his right eye has been torn out. The passage in which Sven first sees his disfigurement in a mirror (while MacIntyre and the surgeon turn

away) is very powerful, even though Sven's first reaction is to say that the "living nightmare" of his face is no surprise to one who has witnessed the horrors of other industrial accidents. His second reaction is to mourn the loss of anonymity: everywhere he goes, he is the object of horror or pity. His third is to resolve to live alone.

But, as he puts it with characteristic irony, "Spending one's life alone is not so easy to accomplish." With MacIntyre's help, Sven becomes a steward in the English Camp Morton; in the winters, he hunts in the company of Tapio, a socialist Finnish trapper. These people introduce him to events miles from Spitsbergen: a shell-shocked English lieutenant shows him the poetry of Sassoon and Owen; Tapio's

politics introduces him to the Finnish civil war and, later, the Russian conquest of Finland after the Revolution. Gradually, however, as Sven becomes a competent trapper, he lives alone with a dog as much a misfit as he is, in a cabin at the northernmost fjord of Spitsbergen. This section of the book is filled with portraits of the beauties of the northern landscape and the cruelties of the weather—and of the horrors of personal violence and political domination as the Nazis conquer Norway and thus Spitzbergen, forcing Sven and his friends to leave.

The book is informed throughout by Miller's personal acquaintance with the harsh beauties of Spitsbergen, gained on a Northern Fellowship. The cabin in which the fictive Sven lives exists, though its occupant, unlike Sven, apparently lived entirely alone. This is a rich book, filled with observations, cynicism, humor, and comradeship very close to love. Perhaps even the real thing.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson