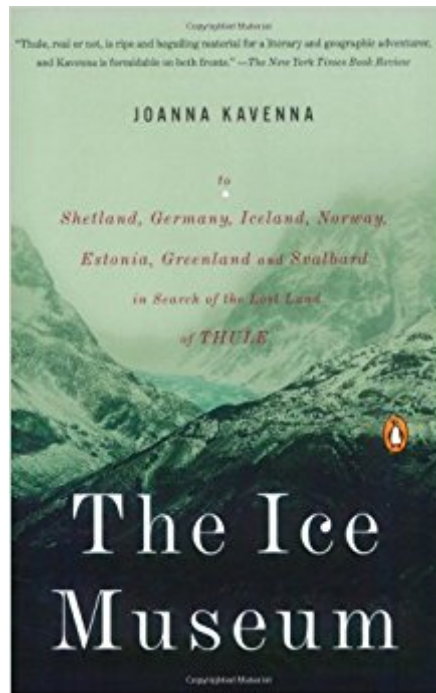




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# The Ice Museum: In Search Of The Lost Land Of Thule



## Synopsis

A legend, a land once seen and then lost forever, Thule was a place beyond the edge of the maps, a mystery for thousands of years. And to the Nazis, Thule was an icy Eden, birthplace of Nordic &#147;purity.&#148; In this exquisitely written narrative, Joanna Kavenna wanders in search of Thule, to Shetland, Iceland, Norway, Estonia, Greenland, and Svalbard, unearthing the philosophers, poets, and explorers who claimed Thule for themselves, from Richard Francis Burton to Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen. Marked by breathtaking snowscapes, haunting literature, and the cold specter of past tragedies, this is a wondrous blend of travel writing and detective work that is impossible to set down. RVIEW: Thule, real or not, is ripe and beguiling material for a literary and geographic adventurer, and Kavenna is formidable on both fronts. . . . Highly cerebral, erudite, refreshing. (The New York Times Book Review)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The fourth-century B.C. Greek explorer Pytheas claimed to have sailed six days from Scotland and discovered a land he named Thule. From Pytheas's brief, oft-disputed account of a land of short winter days where the sea turned into a viscous mass sprang an entire mythology of a magical, northern realm hidden beyond the edges of civilization. Kavenna's discursive book takes a thoughtful stroll through the different myths of Thule, examining how it became symbolic of everything from the Victorians' lost Arcadia to a polluted fantasy of racial purity for the proto-Nazi Thule Society. Kavenna, who's written for the Guardian and other British papers, follows the mark of Thule from the beer halls of Munich to the imagined Thules of the Shetland Islands, Iceland,

Greenland and beyond. While frequently rhapsodic in regard to the epic landscapes, Kavenna resists the urge to attach too much import to her travels, not forcing the mythological on the everyday (unlike many Thule hunters, including fantasist Richard Burton). Although Kavenna's voyages don't solve the mystery as such, they provide fodder for a bracing account of humankind's dream of exploration and of the explorers "determined to discover, to shade in the blanks on the maps." (Feb. 6) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this historical travelogue, Kavenna sets out in search of the quasi-mythical land of Thule, which the Greek explorer Pytheas, in the fourth century B.C., claimed to have reached by sailing north for six days from Britain, then the boundary of the known world. In the following centuries, Arctic voyagers christened each successive discovery from Shetland and Norway to Svalbard; Thule. But the word also became synonymous with the idea of the far north, a "blank white space" to be filled with fears and fantasies of the unknown. For the Romans, who believed that nothing was out of their reach, it was the farthest outpost of their empire; for the Victorians, it was Poe's "wild weird clime

I loved this book from the first word to the last. An exciting adventure for all those seeking a new and different journey. A trip you will never forget.!

Very well written and interesting book. We are traveling next year to the arctic so the content was very significant for us.

I couldn't finish this. I lost interest in Iceland.

Kavenna searches for the legendary land of Thule, first described by a 4th-century BC Greek explorer, who claimed that it lay six days north of Scotland. She follows the routes of previous explorers such as Fridtjof Nansen and Richard Burton and visits the Shetland Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Svalbard, among others. Kavenna explores a number of topics, including the Nazis (who viewed Thule as a lost Aryan homeland), the Cold War (the United States maintains an airbase in Greenland called Thule), and man's impact on the fragile ecosystems of the Arctic. The book contains some beautiful descriptions of the harsh landscape as well as conveying the author's love of these northern lands. Unfortunately, there are no

photos and so the reader has to rely on Kavenna's long, sometimes convoluted descriptions. Very well written but a bit dense in spots.

In the fourth century BC, the Greek merchant and explorer Pytheas (~380-~310 BC) traveled north through the North Sea, and finally ended up at a distant island, which he called Thule. Thule lies far to the north, on the edge of the Arctic ice, where the sun never set during midsummer. Many centuries later, Joanna Kavenna, a native of London, found herself dreaming of an untouched northern landscape, glittering in its perpetual ice. And so, she set out to find Thule...this is the story of her search. In this interesting book, the author does a good job of combining two different stories into one narrative. First and foremost, it is the story of Ms. Kavenna's visits to the northern lands that could have been Thule - the Shetland Islands, Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Svalbard. Secondly, this is the story of the idea of Thule, from Pytheas's history and its ancient detractors, through the Romantics, the Victorians and even the Nazis. Overall, I found this to be quite an interesting book. The author is not an archaeologist, so you will not find any startling information on the ancient north. And she is also not an environmentalist, so while the tale of pollution of the north is described, it is far from being an important part of the book. Instead, what you have is the story of Thule, Thule as it was dreamed of in the past, and Thule as it exists today.

I'll admit I was resistant to this book at first - I guess I expected a more scholarly, weighty approach, rather than Kavenna's very personal picaresque - but she won me over quickly with her elegant, lyric prose, her disarming, understated persona, and her expert blending of travel narrative and history of ideas, literature and exploration. She begins by visiting all the places that have been considered possible locations of Thule, the Shetland Islands, Iceland, Norway, Estonia, advancing northward, capturing what she sees as she smoothly explicates what other travelers have said about those places as Thule, and also examining the turbulent history of Arctic exploration at large. To me, the strongest section of the book is when Kavenna grapples with the most hateful manifestation of the Thule ideal - its expropriation by the Nazis as pristine mythico-historical homeland where snow white Aryan purity reigned. The Thule Society was one of many esoteric/political organizations that flourished in Europe, and one of the handful that served as an early focus and gathering place for what was to become the Nazi party. This confluence of modernist and fascist elements is as troubling as it is seemingly inevitable, and Kavenna approaches this treacherous territory with the proper measure of fascination and

abhorrence. Although Kavenna is very astute in her explication of the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun's big botch, his championing of the Germans, her brief precis of his work is the one place where I found *The Ice Museum* demonstrably off the mark: "He became nostalgic and impatient; he lurched away from the city, writing nothing but rustic romances laced with sentimentality, tales of robust hunting men of few words, clumsy in elegant company, chasing the daughters of the local merchants through the vibrant forests. They lived in huts like mine, they wore big boots, they knew nothing of manners and conventions; they were tormented brutes, aware that society judged them. They were good at whittling wood, and occasionally sheer frustration at their failure to ensnare a local beauty led them to a melodramatic act. One of the rustic hut-dwellers shot himself in the foot one morning because the beautiful daughter of the local businessman wouldn't talk to him." It's hard to believe that Kavenna is old enough to have actually read the books and then forgotten so much about them. Anyone who has looked at *Pan*, the book she references, knows that it was in fact an early work and that its protagonist/narrator Lieutenant Glahn is no child of the land but, obviously an ex-army officer, which indicates social status, an extremely educated and articulate gentleman who chooses to live in a hut out of love of nature and a rejection of human society. And to say he shoots himself in the foot because Edvarda won't talk to him is criminal reductionism. Even August the old wandering protagonist of several of Hamsun's later works, although he does work odd jobs and pine over various beautiful daughters, is not an inarticulate brute, but a drop out from civilization, intent on living a life without ambition. There are a few books like *Growth of the Soil* which revolve around plain folk without the addition of a neurotic dreamer but they are very few, and Hamsun never loses the complexity of his vision. I only wish she had at least glanced at Hamsun again before she wrote those words, but the "brute" idea fits so neatly with her arguments about the lure of fascism that she no doubt wanted it to be true. The other sad thing is that so few people are familiar with Hamsun that no editor called her on it before publication and so few people will know that it is utter bunk. BUT otherwise I enjoyed the book. I worried as I neared the end because, like most picaresques, there's no natural ending that isn't an anti-climax. Unlike William Broad's *The Oracle*, Kavenna isn't going to "solve the mystery." But she accomplishes closure elegantly, describing her visit to the island of Svalbard, a place nobody thought was Thule, but which is icy and cold enough to be truly Thulean. Here she finds scientists charting the climate changes which have already meant great changes to the arctic regions and may yet be the end of Thule, if not all of mankind. Throughout *Kavenna* is able to give a provocative depth to her breezy travel narrative, and I highly recommend it as an entertaining, informative read - perfect for the coming winter.

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