Episode 107: Polar Regions, Comics, and Classics, with Natalie Swain

**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast

**Aven:** where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about polar regions, science fiction, comics and classics.

**Mark:** Today we're talking to Natalie Swain. Natalie defended her PhD from the University of Bristol, this January with a thesis, entitled "a freak in the sheet, a story in the gutter: narrative, comics theory, and Ovid's Amores".

Her primary interests are the ancient Mediterranean world and comics, Latin neurology, reception theory, and the history of polar exploration. She has been teaching classics at the University of Winnipeg, but as you'll hear, she has a range of truly fascinating work and travel experiences as well.

**Aven:** We spoke with her just over a year ago, sorry for the delay, [00:01:00] Natalie.

So bear that in mind, when we talk about her future plans, et cetera.

Hi, Natalie. Thanks so much for being here with us.

**Natalie:** Hello, nice to be here!

**Mark:** Welcome!

**Aven:** All right, let's start with our traditional first question. What do you have in your research interests or in your work that you would say comes out of some unexpected connections between your life and other interests and your scholarly interests or any combination of those?

**Natalie:** Well, that is a very, very big question, I think. To be honest, most of my research interests come from other areas of my life and just happen to interact with Classics in really interesting ways, but I think perhaps the most obvious example is, prior to beginning my PhD, I worked almost full time in the polar regions on what are called expedition cruise ships, taking travelers to very, very isolated parts of the world. So, the Arctic and the Antarctic. [00:02:00] And I've always loved science fiction, horror scifi in particular. And so, as I was reading more and more of this stuff well in the polar regions, I kept noticing these connections that connected sort of this idea of the supernatural to these polar regions.

And again, with my background in classics, it suddenly, I just-- I remember sitting in a coffee shop with one of my partners in Buenos Aires before going to the Antarctic one year and it just hitting me that all of this is really, really looking back at these classical ideas of the polar regions, this idea of-- well, the Hyperboreans in particular, this idea of these supernatural places on earth that defy physics.

And I started looking into it cause I was just really interested and that's what we do as academics. And I just kept finding all of these connections in literature, in exploration history, [00:03:00] that really tie back to these ancient ideas of what the poles are, were-- and in modern literature and modern film, if you think of John Carpenter's The Thing or Santa Claus, all of these ideas really just-- you can see this really interesting pattern where these ancient ideas just braid through the exploration that's taking place, European exploration that's taking place over centuries and just bleeding into the narratives that we tell about these regions.

So I think that's-- to me, that's one of the most interesting connections. Cause I mean, if you watch The Thing, most people aren't going to go 'Ha ha! Hyperboreans!'. But when you start thinking about it you have, I mean-- of course the plot of The Thing, I should probably say it very briefly, is an American Antarctic base that comes upon-- well, and a Norwegian base in the sequel-- that comes upon an alien life has been preserved in the ice and it's basically this [00:04:00] shape-changing creature that takes over individuals and then mimics them. And of course the big fear is that it will then get loose and take over the planet. And again, and then you look at Santa Claus, which again, you think, 'Okay, The Thing and Santa Claus? What's going on here?', but Santa Claus, again, you have this immortal being that makes its home specifically in the polar regions. And almost because it's in this polar setting it's imbued with this immortality, this sort of fantastical setting where he can have elves that live forever and he can have these reindeer that their noses glow and they can fly.

And again, I mean-- no, the Hyperboreans probably didn't have reindeer, but-- not reindeer that could fly anyways. But again, you sort of get the sense of this being a place that really defies physics. And specifically when you look into , when you track the history of this you see right from the very start of what I call the 'polar literature cycle', which really starts with the Rime of the Ancient [00:05:00] Mariner at the end of the 1800s.

You get this sense of this being a place that is not for man, that is for creatures that are beyond us, that are perhaps living in their own form of a utopia, as the Hyperboreans supposedly did according to Pindar and Herodotus and-- but yeah, you get this very, very ancient sense about what the poles are.

And then of course, when you look at exploration history, you see the way these ancient ideas of the poles directly influenced explorers right up until, I would say the end of the 18th century with James Cook cause James Cook, and many of the explorers who were exploring the Southern Hemisphere were directly influenced by an idea that was first put forward by the astronomer Ptolemy in the 2nd century CE living in the Roman Empire, and he essentially suggested that the universe liked balance. And so because [00:06:00] we have this wonderful temperate Eurasian continent in the north, there must be a similar continent in the south. And so many, many explorers again, for centuries through the medieval period are looking for this mystical Southern continent, this Terra Australis, which of course is where you get the name for Australia, as well. And it was really with Captain Cook who's exploring at the end of the 18th century, he finally got far enough south that it was very clear that there wasn't this temperate continent. But again, interestingly, if you go to New Zealand or the South Georgia Islands that Captain Cook explored, you often get these bays or these capes that are called Cape Disappointment, Disappointment Bay.

And this is because as he's exploring, he's like, 'Ha ha! I have discovered Terra Australis. This is the grand Southern continent'. And he rounds the bend and 'oh, oh crap. It's just an island. Okay, so it's not.' And then he gets really far south, he gets to 71 degrees south, and still doesn't manage to discover Antarctica, unfortunately.

But it was really at that point that people were finally kind of [00:07:00] like, 'okay, there isn't this mystical Southern continent.' But again, it's this ancient idea that just persists.

**Mark:** And there's also a bit of reflection of that in the novel Frankenstein, I guess, with the frame narrative of Walton, trying to go north.

**Natalie:** Yes! I'm so glad you brought that up because yeah, that is one of, in my opinion, one of the most interesting because Frankenstein, even at one point says to, I think to the explorer, that he's going to walk to the North Pole and he's gonna set himself on fire there as this grand sign that he is somehow separate from man.

Like, he can do this thing that these men are killing themselves trying to do and in the opening page, there's the, as you say, the wonderful framing device of Walton sending this letter to his sister. He talks about this being a place of-- where he's going to break through the ice [00:08:00] and discover this open sea and this land of eternal sunshine and eternal plenty.

And again, that's an idea that really comes to us right from the ancient world where-- I mean, there is a sense in Greek writers that the poles, or the Arctic at least, does have this 24 hour daylight at some point. And so then there's the sense that, well, if they have 24 hour daylight, there has to be this paradise up there, this beautiful area where everything grows just wonderfully and people--well, you get back to the Hyperboreans, I'm repeating that a lot-- but that idea of there has to be this Northern paradise. You see that through literature, you see that even on maps, some of Mercator's maps of the Arctic from the 1500s represents the north as this ice-less area there where there's land, possibly a hole that drains into the middle of the earth, all of these really, again, kind of unusual ideas that, in my opinion, just [00:09:00] demonstrated defiance of physics.

**Aven:** Now there's more-- I want to ask more about that, but maybe briefly could you outline who the Hyperboreans were in Greek myths and thought and like what those sources are, and then I want to come back to that because--

**Natalie:** Sorry, I get very carried away as you know-- yeah, so the Hyperboreans. I don't think people are really sure who exactly they were if they really existed. But they do turn up in a lot of ancient material in, and Herodotus and Pindar are the two that I'm particularly interested in. But there is also evidence that Homer wrote about them, that Hesiod wrote about them. But we just don't have that. And people who believe they were real believe they were in sort of, I believe the north east Asian area.

But when you look at the writings of Pindar in particular, he really puts forward this idea of them being this immortal people who live 'hyper-boreas' so beyond the north wind, who live for a thousand [00:10:00] years, and then they're so done with life at that point that they throw themselves into the sea, basically.

They live with music, they live with art, they're philosophers, and it's really-- Hyperborea where they live, it's supposed to be this land that's essentially just an ancient paradise. Well, if you really like philosophy, I guess it's an ancient paradise, but yeah. And it's essentially, they live until they're satisfied, they've had enough and then they choose to end their lives. And of course-- well in all times, but especially for the ancients, that would have been a very nice thing, I think.

**Aven:** One of the many definitions of blessedness, yes. The idea of having what you want and then dying before you're done-- when you're happy with it.

**Natalie:** Yeah.

**Aven:** Yeah. They kind of function in a similar way as the slightly more mythical, maybe, Ethiopians in Homer, right? Like the idea that they-- and does Pindar talk about them as people whom the gods visit? I can't [00:11:00] remember.

**Natalie:** Yeah. Actually, I don't remember if it's in Pindar, but there is this idea that actually Apollo spends his winters with them.

Which, again is really interesting if you think of Apollo as the god of the sun. And of course-- well, I mean, they don't have full sunlight in the winter north of the Arctic Circle, but they certainly have full sunlight during the summer, like 24 hour daylight. Yeah, so I think they were supposed to be the favorites of Apollo.

**Aven:** Right. Yeah, that was what I was trying to remember. Cause the Ethiopians are the ones that live in the south, not necessarily in the pole, but in the immoderate south, and also beyond civilization, at least in Homer and the gods go off and visit them too. So there's this idea of people in the inaccessible regions being somehow outside the human scope and being in contact with the divine in a way that regular people in the regular parts of the world are not.

**Natalie:** Yeah, absolutely. And one of the really-- I mean, I [00:12:00] can't speak for the south-- but the interesting elements of the Arctic and part of why there is this belief that this extreme region is so outside what the Greeks or the Romans would have seen as the norm was because of the Big Dipper, Ursa Major, the constellation which the Greeks did call 'Arktos', for 'bear'.

And unlike many of the other constellations, it doesn't --certainly from the Greek perspective-- it doesn't actually set, it just circles in the sky. And so again, they saw this and were sort of like, 'well, clearly something up there is different. Clearly the gods are doing something very unusual up there'. And so what could that be, I guess?

**Mark:** So kind of getting back to these connections with the Arctic and getting back to Frankenstein. One of the interesting things that I like about that connection is that Walton is kind of going beyond what he should do. Right? He's doing something that [00:13:00] humans shouldn't do, go to these off-limits lands, and that's mirroring Frankenstein's kind of treading on God's toes by creating life. And interestingly also usurping the woman's role as giving life. And so they both kind of risk their downfall by, you know, doing something that's not supposed to be for them.

**Aven:** And Doctor Frankenstein specifically-- I mean, I guess he's not really a doctor-- but Frankenstein says that specifically to him, right?

Like, he warns him repeatedly not to, to go back, not to go beyond these bounds. And then that's what sets up the whole frame narrative. 'All right. You don't believe me. Let me tell you why you shouldn't do it because this is how it went for me. And now I will tell you a novel length story'.

**Natalie:** I mean--again, taking that and broadening it to this polar literature, what's really interesting about that is you often get again, [00:14:00] starting with the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, these polar narratives which sort of act as a warning about ' maybe we shouldn't be doing this. Maybe we shouldn't be going to these places that are very, very dangerous and that we shouldn't be' is they're often framed. They often have these framing devices where an explorer has survived and is back in the quote unquote 'real' world and is recounting this to an individual.

So in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, it's the one man who survived. The plot of that poem is these-- I can't remember what their profession is, but they're sailing in the South and they follow this albatross that basically acts as good luck for them. And one of them, this man who survives, shoots the albatross and this essentially sets off a chain of events where everybody else on the ship dies in these really not very nice ways.

And this one man survives and he comes back and he's actually talking to a man who's about to go off and get married, strangely enough. [00:15:00] And he tells him this story, as 'this is what happened to me and we need to be careful what we do'. And then you get other stories. Jules Verne wrote two novels, one was something of Captain Hatteras--

**Aven:** yeah--

**Natalie:** --The Adventures of Captain Hatteras. And that-- again at the end, one of the people-- it's about this-- I think it's a British expedition, it's British or American who want to find the North Pole and they eventually get to this island.

But the captain, Captain Hatteras, is so obsessed with this North Pole that getting there fundamentally drives him mad. And as it ends, all these men are back in again, the regular world. And one of the men I believe is talking to a doctor who's working with Captain Hatteras in an asylum, and they talk about Captain Hatteras forever marching northward.

And so again, you often get this interesting juxtaposition between the quote unquote 'real' world and what these explorers are doing. And so what's so wonderful, tying back to what you [00:16:00] were saying, Mark, about what Shelley does and Frankenstein is-- of course, Dr. Frankenstein's narrative is nested within this polar expedition narrative, both of which are defying the quote unquote 'regular' laws of the world.

Which, I mean, I'm not sure what that does narratologically, but it's taking what is happening in polar literature and making it-- and almost doubling down on the hubris of exploration, of science and all that.

**Aven:** Yeah. And if you have the associations of the pole as being a divine region, not just inaccessible to humans, but linked specifically to the divine, then that makes that even more-- you know, when Frankenstein is Prometheus, who transgresses not only-- he doesn't just cross what humans should do. More to the point, he transgresses, he takes the divine prerogative. And you know, who knows [00:17:00] what Mary Shelley knew about her classical sources on that one. There's no particular reason she wouldn't know about the Hyperboreans or classical ideas about the Arctic, but of course it could have just been filtered through other things to her as well, but still--

**Natalie:** yeah, for sure.

**Aven:** It works really well. Yeah. The other one that-- it doesn't have quite the same context, but the one that comes to mind is, I think it's Edgar Rice Burroughs who has the pole as the point through which you access the other world in the center of our world, Calandra I think it's called or something like that, where the dinosaurs still roam and things are crazy. But you get there by going to the pole and going through the pole.

**Natalie:** And that actually, I can't remember when he was writing--

**Aven:** --late 19th, early 20th century.

**Natalie:** -- So that's directly influenced by the idea of --probably you may have heard about this because it sort of had a weird resurgence recently on social media-- but the hollow earth idea.

**Aven:** Oh yeah.

Yeah.

**Natalie:** And [00:18:00] one of the tenants of that, or some of the people who believe in that, is that these openings in the earth are at the North and South Poles. And again, that ties through, I believe through Mercator who has this really infamous map of the poles. And he says that this is where all of these rivers converge and they flow inside the earth. And that passes through this empty earth that everything sort of cycles through .

**Aven:** And also of course the most recent King Kong movie.

**Natalie:** Oh, I haven't seen it!

**Aven:** Well, let me just tell you--

**Natalie:** Please do--

**Aven:** There's a hollow earth! Spoilers, I guess? I don't know if there's such a thing as spoilers for the King Kong vs. Godzilla movie, but the hollow earth theory is acted upon and they do go, I don't know that they actually say it's the pole, but they go to the Arctic.

**Natalie:** Oh really? Oh my goodness, I have to see this now!

**Aven:** Yes. It's research. It's research, Natalie!

**Natalie:** Absolutely. It's research.

**Aven:** That may be the only true redeeming factor [00:19:00] of the movie, but it is entertaining. It does, you know, as movies about giant monsters go, it has giant monsters in it. It has a bonus giant monster that I won't tell you about because that is spoilers. So, you know, I feel like that was what I wanted out of the movie and I got giant monsters, so yeah.

**Natalie:** Excellent. I'll go into it for the giant monsters and then be excited about the hollow earth.

**Aven:** Exactly. But yeah, no, I mean, it's absolutely picking up directly on that whole set of... theories, I guess, is a decent word for it. But at this point it feels like it's not so much theories as modern myths maybe.

**Natalie:** Yeah.

**Aven:** Yeah. I know-- it was pseudoscience-- that's not right, it was science. It was reasonable science back in the 19th century. Yeah.

**Natalie:** Yeah. Like I think Edmond Halley, it was based on something that he had suggested to try and explain why compasses sometimes don't function properly [00:20:00] or something like that.

I can't remember the exact origins of it, but yeah, now it's definitely pseudoscience at the very best.

**Aven:** Okay. Let's go back even one step further, taking our frame narrative out a click. Talk to me more about the ship work you did, because I know that's not classics specifically, but it's fascinating.

**Natalie:** The ship work I did. I still do it, actually. I mean, it's a great job. I work-- well, okay. When we're not in the middle of a pandemic, I should say, I still do it. But I work on-- they're fundamentally small ships that take 100-200 passengers. So, people who are travelers, who are tourists, really. And we take them to really isolated parts of the world. I used to, before starting my doctorate, I would do it all over the world. But now I've sort of limited to the polar regions, which is a part of the world I really love.

And-- Yeah, I-- sorry, I don't know how much detail to go into about it--

**Aven:** So when you say you do it, like here's some [00:21:00] basic questions: are you a sailor or a guide or a cook? Like, what are you doing?

**Natalie:** Okay, that helps! Thank you!

**Aven:** No problem, I'm just portraying my lack of knowledge!

**Natalie:** It's one of those things where, when you know too much about a subject, you never realize that-- yeah. No, I work as a guide, fundamentally. It's a really interesting job because you-- I started off as an historian on board, cause I have always been really interested in polar history and then moved into more of sort of a managerial position, but we work as guides.

So we take people ashore. We drive Zodiacs, which are boats that were sort of made famous by Jacques Cousteau, they're little inflatable boats. They're very durable. They're wonderful.

**Aven:** If people have been whale-watching, they've probably done it in a Zodiac--

**Natalie:** Exactly. Yeah, that kind of thing. And so we drive people to shore, but we also take people on Zodiac cruises.

So we cruise through the ice, see whales, all sorts of wonderful things. The primary places [00:22:00] I work are Svalbard, which is just north of Norway. I have also gone through the Canadian Arctic a couple of times, which is pretty fantastic. And in the Antarctic I've only worked on the Antarctic peninsula side, so that's the South American side of Antarctica.

But yeah, basically taking people ashore, seeing lots of wildlife, it's mainly wildlife focused, but the history is also pretty freaking awesome, I have to be honest, they're just such unique parts of the world.

**Aven:** And how did you get into it? Like, how did that opportunity arise in the first place? This is in no way, just because now it's sounding like an incredibly interesting career switch for me.

**Natalie:** It's a pretty awesome job, yes. I... it's actually quite embarrassing. I was sleeping with the right person. When I was doing my Masters degree, I was doing that in the UK and my partner at the time, he did this work fairly full time. And as I was coming to the end of my Masters degree the Arctic season was starting up and [00:23:00] I wasn't really sure what I was going to do. I didn't have the money to go right into a PhD. So I thought 'I'll just get a job'. And then the person who hired basically said, 'oh, well we need an historian for the trip up the Norwegian coastline. Do you want to do it?' And I sort of said, 'well, that would be lovely, but I don't know anything about Norway.'

And then she said, 'well, the trip leaves in two weeks, does that give you enough time?' And so I did a lot of research in two weeks and came up with this material and then just really fell in love with it, specifically fell in love with the Arctic and yeah, just wanted to keep doing it. And it's a fun, fantastic job.

**Aven:** Yeah, sounds it! Sorry, I'm just having-- I'm just dreaming of the fjords. What can I say?

**Natalie:** Oh, the fjords are beautiful!

**Aven:** It's an example of the kinds of serendipity that not only can lead to new ideas and new approaches to things, but I think almost have to. Like, you almost need serendipity in order for new ideas to come up [00:24:00] because how could you have planned to say, 'well, after my Masters, I will find a completely unrelated job that allows me to find a completely new way of thinking about something from the ancient world'. I mean, you can't do that. That's not a plan you can make.

**Natalie:** No. And specifically on this topic, I mean, it was also my other-- what I'm doing my doctorate on in comics had similar serendipity, but in terms of this subject, like the polar regions and in modern literature, really-- and well, no, in Western literature, I guess we'll say-- it had to come about serendipitously because like, I've always been fascinated by polar explorers.

I've always loved the ancient world and I've always been this massive fan of science fiction and fantasy and comic books, all of which have this direct impact or are impacted by these patterns of the polar regions in literature. I mean, one of my favorite shows growing up was Stargate SG-1. And of course there you have one of the Stargates [00:25:00] discovered in Antarctica, which is where the Ancients, who-- going back to what Mark was also saying-- it's these creatures who are semi divine.

**Mark:** Another connection just occurred to me especially similar to The Thing. I just happened to be recently rewatching some old Doctor Who stories--

**Aven:** I was going to bring it up if you didn't bring it up, but I figured you would bring it up.

**Mark:** And there's a story, The Seeds of Doom, which is at an Antarctic research base and they uncover alien plant pods. And it's this incredible feeling of claustrophobia, of sort of being trapped in their base while this strange alien thing is going on. And then trying to keep it there and keep it from getting out and going back to the rest of the world.

**Aven:** There you have two types of hubris in the villains of the piece. One is capitalism, right? Cause there's the greedy guys who just want to steal it. Well, they're working for the other guy, but basically they're mercenaries. So they're there for the money. [00:26:00] And then the other villain of the piece is the one who wants to wipe out all animal life and take over, have only vegetable life consume the world because he's mad, but--

**Natalie:** Oh my goodness, that sounds fantastic.

**Aven:** He's an aristocrat. Oh, if you haven't seen it, you do have to watch it.

**Natalie:** I haven't, I've got to go watch that!

**Aven:** It absolutely is following in the footsteps of many of these-- you know, it's not directly inspired by The Thing, I think. In the way that many Doctor Who's are, they, you know, take a previously done concept and take their own spin on it. But yeah, there's also in the more modern Doctor Who-- well, there's a good number of Arctic moments, but there is that one with Peter Capaldi with Santa Claus. It's really a dream figment of his-- like, it's a dream actually caused by alien crabs. Anyway, it's complicated, but it's this whole dream, you know, Inception-like set of dreams within dreams, but they end up at the pole with [00:27:00] Santa Claus and his elves, but it's a polar research base that Santa Claus suddenly visits essentially.

**Natalie:** Oh goodness, that sounds amazing!

**Aven:** And there you go, two more pieces for your reception work-- I don't remember what that one's called, but it's one of the Christmas specials, 2018 or something like that, somewhere around there. You'll find it.

**Natalie:** That's crazy. It must've been, I'm fairly embarrassed to say that my Doctor Who knowledge is very limited to like, probably the Tennant run, basically.

**Aven:** Well that's all right. Mark can go off and think about any others. Cause I feel like there's at least another couple of-- I mean they revisit the Antarctic or the Antarctic base with the, because the first doctor--

**Mark:** --but the original Cybermen story is at a polar base.

**Aven:** Right, right. So there's also a Cybermen story at a polar base, an Antarctic one again, I think.

Yeah. I mean they use it, they like using it [00:28:00] in the same way they like space stations, because it gives you the--not 'locked room' exactly--

**Natalie:** --but the closed circle model, like--

**Aven:** --the country house murder kind of approach where we've got everybody on an island in a space, we can't--no in and out, let's do what we're doing.

I mean the Cyberman one, the fact that it's the Antarctic doesn't really matter that much, except that it's isolated, but still it's another one in the long series.

**Natalie:** That's fantastic. I love that, I'm taking notes.

**Aven:** There's also of course, the pole and the Arctic in comics, famously with Superman.

**Natalie:** Absolutely, yeah. And that was actually-- like I said, I was sitting in this cafe in Buenos Aires and I was rereading HP Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness because of course that's another wonderful example. And I was talking to my partner at the time about Superman and all of a sudden it was just like, ding! All of these things connected. Cause yeah, you have Superman's Fortress of [00:29:00] Solitude. And then also if you look in the Marvel universe with Captain America. That's where he, again, crashes in the poles and he's preserved there. People always come back to it--

**Aven:** -- different kinds of superhumans there. Right? So the superhuman alien that is Superman and the becomes-superhuman Captain America.

**Natalie:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Aven:** And that's the only two who can survive in those places.

**Natalie:** Yeah, exactly. And interestingly that also ties in part to-- I mean, of course we keep bringing up Santa Claus-- but a tradition in children's literature about the polar regions, specifically English children's literature that came about in the 1800s, not so much originating from these ancient ideas, but they then become entwined with them because-- let me start from the beginning.

But of course, you know, 19th century, you have these massive British expeditions that are going off and disappearing, [00:30:00] most famously the third Franklin expedition. And you start to have British writers incorporating the poles into their literature in the form, in the guise of a beautiful woman who seduces young boys or takes them away. Most famously now of course, CS Lewis' Ice Queen, but then you also get George MacDonald a Scottish writer who wrote, I can't remember what the-- it was called At the Back of the North Wind, I think. Yeah, you have this little boy who's basically probably dying, who is swept up by this beautiful north wind that takes him to the north and he sits on icebergs and he watches whalers and all of this as he's basically in reality, lying sick and dying.

And what I think is perhaps one of the most interesting and invisible associations is with Peter [00:31:00] Pan. Because-- and I don't know that this is widely known, but Robert Falcon Scott and JM Barrie were actually friends and Barrie was the godfather of Scott's son, Peter Scott. And apparently one of Scott's last letters when he'd reached the south pole and he was coming back-- of course he and his men died rather tragically-- one of the final letters he wrote was to Barrie. And so then you get these really interesting references in Barrie's work to the polar regions with, you know, Neverland-- you fly towards the North Star-- again, being this place of immortality, of eternal childhood, which Barrie then ties into in some of his later talks that he gives into how these polar explorers are actually preserved in ice. And so they're preserved at this young age and how he thinks of his Lost Boys in this similar way. And you get [00:32:00] even lines of dialogue in Peter Pan reflecting writing about the poles with Wendy telling-- I think her brothers are about to be, I think they have to walk the plank or something like that. And she tells them to 'die as good English gentlemen', which is almost word for word how Scott writes about one of his companions' death that he died as a good English gentlemen. And so again, in Barrie, you have him then responding to this tradition of polar literature for children, where the poles are sort of this seductress, this dark, almost sexual force that then he's again, weaving into these ancient ideas of possibly this being a paradise, eternal youth. But it has this dark twist on it in this really interesting way.

**Mark:** That's a fascinating connection. I did not know anything about that.

**Natalie:** Yeah. And again, I do wonder how many people at the time knew about these connections or if it was sort of just again, subtly running through Barrie's [00:33:00] work and then you get Milne writing Winnie the Pooh and a lot-- sorry, this'll be my last thing and then I'll let you guys talk-- but Milne, then he's writing very much-- when he writes some of the early Winnie the Pooh... tales, I guess you'd call them, he's very, very sarcastically and critically responding to the 'glory', quote unquote, of these polar expeditions and these associations in children's literature. And he has in one of the early tales of Pooh and Christopher Robin looking for the north pole and Winnie the Pooh of course asks Christopher 'what is the north pole?' And, and he says, 'oh, I'm not actually sure. It's just, it's just a thing you discover'. And they talk about, 'oh, well, you know, we should eat all of our provisions now because it'll give us less weight to carry' and all of these things that are clearly these subtle jabs at these polar explorers.

**Aven:** That's really interesting. I mean as a larger topic, I guess the whole idea of the Arctic in all of this literature-- I mean, it's too much to do all at [00:34:00] once, of course. But yeah, it just keeps unfolding. I mean, because when you start building in the entire genre of travel literature and explorers literature and explorer correspondence and, you know, then that's like another set of tentacles to--

**Natalie:** --absolutely--

**Aven:** Having just said that that's already too much material to even begin to try to comprehend as one present, have you thought about this other large body of material? So the obvious point-- when you talk about the Arctic region anyway-- it's also that there's a whole bunch of explorers, but there's also a whole bunch of people who already live there. So you know, these traditions that come out of the ancient world, they're coming out of a particular European tradition and then get built into these other explorer narratives.

Have you done any thinking about or looked at or considered Indigenous stories and presence in the north? Obviously not as something that comes out of a classical tradition, but does that play any part in your thinking or have you been thinking about that at all?

**Natalie:** I have, actually. It's unfortunately still in the very [00:35:00] nascent stage, but I've been considering specifically because my interest is-- I mean, as someone hoping to be a professional classicist, it does all have to tie back to Classics either unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your perspective.

I've been really interested in a lot of the-- specifically the explorers I'm looking at at the beginning of the 20th century, specifically I'm thinking a lot of the Americans --well actually, and Amundsen now that I'm thinking about it-- working in, in Greenland or Northern Canada, Rasmussen too, another--anyway!

Okay, too many explorers. But when you think about their expeditions, regardless of the level of racism they express, and in some cases it's extremely racist, they are extremely dependent on Inuit guides for their work. Like when you hear about say, Cook or Peary, who are two Americans who claimed to reach the North Pole --they probably didn't-- but they of course brought Inuit guides with them [00:36:00] and worked with them and lived with them.

And there's, again, I'm not Inuit, so I may be wrong about this and some of your-- hopefully listeners can correct you, but there is a fear, at least at the time, of going too far out on the ice for these Inuit explorers. Because of course, if you go out onto the fast ice, it's quite dangerous. In the summer you have cracking, you have crevices opening up and you can fall into the water, falling into the water at all up there is extremely dangerous. And so you have these stories again and again, of-- interestingly, very similar to the Winnie the Pooh narrative-- where these Inuit guides are sort of like, 'what is this, why are we going to this 'North Pole'? What are you talking about?' And some of these explorers told their Inuit guides that what it was, was a giant metal nail driven into the pole of the earth. Because in Inuit culture, because [00:37:00] metals are so rare in the north, this was something of value they could then understand, or that they could then understand the value of. Or you again have interesting things when you start talking-- like, Cook and Peary are--

it's a whole other podcast, their relationship, but they're two American explorers who were actually colleagues and then they ended up kind of hating each other because they both claimed to reach the Pole within days of each other in 1908, I want to say. And again, in hindsight, probably neither of them made it, but they spent basically the rest of their lives trying to prove that the other one was wrong and didn't do it, that they lied and Peary fairly successfully proved that Cook lied. Cause he probably did. And when you look at some of the anecdotal evidence of later people asking their Inuit guides 'did you make it, how far did you go'? These Inuit guides would often say 'we never left sight of land', which of course indicates that [00:38:00] they didn't reach the North Pole, but it also isn't entirely to be believed, I guess you would say,. Not again, because the Inuit shouldn't be believed, but because they were often lied to by these Americans or Europeans that they were guiding about how close they were to land, because they didn't want to go out onto these vast ice fields.

**Aven:** So they'd say, 'oh, we're still-- no, no, we're still in sight of land', it's fine. Yeah.

**Natalie:** Yeah. 'We're not, we're not far away at all. Don't worry about it'. And so I've sort of considered it from that perspective, because again, you get-- I just, I find it really interesting the way values are translated between cultures. So it's not so much that I've considered specifically Inuit beliefs about the poles, because, I mean, I don't think traditionally the Inuit cared about these North Poles. They were far more interested in... well, survival for one thing, rather than these really arbitrary goals. But again, the way[00:39:00] people communicated this to each other-- on that subject though, a really interesting, more recent example of polar literature --recently been translated into a TV series is The Terror by Dan Simmons and one of the things I really like about well, both the show and the book-- not the, not the special effects, the special effects are awful, but anyways-- is the way he incorporates Inuit mythology into what is dangerous about these poles. So you, again, get this sense of, like I've been talking about in much of polar literature, the sense that the poles are somewhere a little dangerous, a little outside what we as humans should know, and should understand, but there's specifically a female Inuk character who has this understanding and this relationship with the natural world and the supernatural world that ties into Inuit mythology, real world Inuit mythology that allows her [00:40:00] to survive. And then-- spoiler alert-- allows Crozier, who's one of the protagonists to end up surviving as he embraces the Inuit way of life. There is, unfortunately, a little bit of the whole 'noble savage' kind of thing, unfortunately---

**Aven:** And a little 'magical Indian', it sounds a bit--

**Natalie:** --absolutely, but it is interesting the way-- I found it interesting the way he's trying to incorporate those Inuit beliefs into this larger narrative tendency or narrative theme.

**Aven:** Yeah. I think it's the whole talk about what the pole was thought to be in the 17th and 18th, even to the 19th century also helps, I think, with the understanding of why people wanted to reach the pole so much in the 19th century and even into the 20th. I mean, yes, by then they knew, at least by the 20th century, they knew that it wasn't the access to a hollow earth or whatever-- probably knew, one never knows for sure what they think they were [00:41:00] going to find-- I mean, I know that European explorers started to develop a bit of an obsession with these arbitrary markers of like the highest, the farthest, the whatever. So some of it's just that. But, you know, the poles had been a seeming target for real-- like if you could find them, you would find something magical and immensely valuable.

And even once that becomes probably not true from a scientific perspective, I think that that understanding that that is probably impacting various people's desires to reach there, that it still has this mythical feeling, even if they know that it's not really true. I think helps to explain a little bit of the ongoing obsession with reaching the pole, because, you know, just like the Inuit guides, doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

Like, it's not a spot! You learn as a child that it isn't a literal pole. It stops feeling like there's any-- like, you're just going to reach some spot in an otherwise [00:42:00] undifferentiated patch of ice and be like, 'hooray'.

**Natalie:** Absolutely. Yeah.

**Aven:** It's not even like the, you know, the top of Mount Everest. I get like, there's a top of Mount Everest. I wouldn't want to do it, but I can see why somebody else cares about getting there.

**Natalie:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Mark:** That reminds me of possibly the stupidest attempt to reach the North Pole in Top Gear.

**Aven:** Oh God. Yes.

**Natalie:** Oh God. Did they really?

**Aven:** Yeah, they tried to drive there.

**Natalie:** Oh yes, that's right, I did see that! Oh my God, that was so--God, that was awful--

**Aven:** I mean, of course they are intentionally stupid on that show, so fair enough.

But yeah--

**Mark:** -- and I mean, their takeaway was that, you know, the machinery is not up to it. It's just too hard.

**Aven:** Yeah, yeah.

**Natalie:** And I also hate to like, be a bit snitty about it, but like--

**Aven:** Oh, be snitty about it!

**Natalie:** --Robert Falcon Scott figured that out like a hundred years ago. I mean come on guys, we knew this already--

**Aven:** No I mean that's--you know, the premise of that show is ridiculous, over the [00:43:00] top hubristic endeavors. Yeah, I was thinking about that a little bit too. I don't know that it counts as classical reception, but though if you can get Top Gear into a footnote of a classical reception paper, I would be impressed.

**Natalie:** That would be pretty good. I will say, and this is off topic, but I did manage to get Mass Effect into one of my doctoral footnotes and I'm pretty proud of that.

**Aven:** Gotta have goals! You know, writing a dissertation is a long process. You got to have some goals that are just for you. Maybe then actually that's a good place to spend a few minutes, cause I don't want to keep you too long, but tell us a little bit about your dissertation work-- cause I know all of this stuff about the Arctic is an ongoing interest, but it's it's maybe the next project in terms of actual publications--

**Natalie:** --yes, it's in my 'in tray', so to speak.

**Aven:** So your current work that you're finishing up now-- I say proleptically--that you are finishing and putting the last finishing touches, is [00:44:00] on comics. So, do you want to tell us a little bit about that and you know, your five minute elevator pitch--

**Natalie:** Well, comics-- again, I mean, I'm going to tie this back to your very, very, very first question about how everything randomly fits together. I maybe shouldn't advertise this fact, but I was never actually a big comics reader until I started doing this doctorate, which surprises a lot of people, obviously, because you would think that it would be 'oh, interested in comics. Oh yeah, okay, Classics. That makes sense'. But in terms of Classics, what I've always been really interested in is Latin literature, in particular. Like Aven I also adore Catullus and when I was starting my PhD, I'm at a university in the UK and so it works a little differently there, but I basically applied with my doctoral topic.

And so that had been accepted, I was good to go. And I happened to read Scott McCloud's book Understanding Comics, which is a really interesting text, even if you're not a comic scholar, very [00:45:00] readable. And it kept occurring to me as I was reading this, that this is exactly the way Latin elegy functions.

And specifically I was thinking at the time of Ovid's Heroides and time, but then again, I happened to be talking to my advisor, wasn't even wasn't even working on the doctorate yet, but I knew she was going to be my advisor. And I sort of said, 'oh, you should read this book because I noticed that it's very similar to elegy'.

And she basically just sort of put her tea down --because of course she's British-- and said, 'oh my God, I just read that myself. You're right. That's what your doctorate should be about'. And so I kind of ran with it, but essentially what I'm doing is-- I mean, if you look at comics and now I have looked at a lot of comics, cause comics are loads of fun-- there's a lot of the ancient world in comics, not just in superhero comics or in quote unquote 'educational' comics, but just all across the board. And I'm sort of turning it around a little bit and I'm looking at the way we can use an [00:46:00] understanding of how comics build narrative to better understand how Latin elegy builds narrative. I know Aven and I suspect Mark know this already, but Latin elegy is really a genre that people for quite a long time were saying, 'oh, there's no narrative here. There's no story. This is just--' the quote that I always say is 'a montage of quotations and cries from the heart', is what-- I think it was Paul Veyne who said that.

And essentially what I'm starting to argue is that no, if we look at these poems the way we look at comics, understanding that this is a chain of fragments that are linked together in a sequence, we can then find these internal elements within each individual poem that actually tie them together, that develop a cause and effect narrative across an entire book. And it's really only, in my opinion, through understanding this idea of [00:47:00] fragmentary narrative that you get so completely, I guess, expressed in comics. Like it's very, very obvious that this is a narrative from fragments in comics, which you don't get as much in any other medium, that allows us to get this new perspective on Latin elegy and how it's producing narrative. And then-- I mean, I continue from there obviously, looking at how these fragments work together to, even outside the sequence, to enhance that narrative in a way that is analogous to comics. So that's the work I'm doing now.

**Mark:** I remember when I met you, I guess it was about two years ago now at a conference at the CAC and we started talking and you were telling me about your research. And I got very excited because it really sort of intersected with the stuff that I was doing because I've always been really interested in time and I've been interested in narratology and how the two [00:48:00] kind of intersect.

And now I'm looking at how space is used to figure time and what that can tell us about the way we think. But I also previously worked on looking at how time and verb constructions are used to regulate a narrative. But now hearing about how your work is going and thinking of, you know, looking at a kind of visual medium like comics and using those observations to understand how a literary genre like elegy is working, it's just so fascinating.

**Aven:** And he gets incoherent with excitement about it.

**Natalie:** No that's awesome! I have to say Mark, I really think we should work together on something at some point because it is that temporal element that I find absolutely fascinating. Unfortunately I got away from it a little bit in my PhD, but I'm working on an article right [00:49:00] now about time and comics and time in Heroides, being this wonderful series of letters that Ovid wrote ostensibly from the heroines in classical story-- so, Penelope to Odysseus, et cetera-- at key moments in those narratives, and again, traditional scholars have long said 'oh, these are narratives that are-- these letters are stuck in time'. And more recent scholars have been saying, 'no, they don't that they're not stuck in time. They actually represent larger sort of 'what if' narratives'? And what I would like to do is argue that these letters function ostensibly like a comics panel where yes, they represent an 'individual' quote unquote, stuck-in-time moment within a narrative.

But if you look at a comics panel and Mark, I really think you should read McCloud's Understanding Comics because it's fantastic in this way. One thing he shows is how in a single panel you actually do get a brief narrative progression. It's not just a single moment, it's not a second. There is actually [00:50:00] time that passes within a panel which again, varies based on the size of the panel, whether or not there's dialogue, things like this. And what I would like to essentially argue is that both interpretations of the Heroides are correct because we have to again, be looking at these as fragments, as these windows into a single moment that isn't really a single moment. And how that sort of helps reconcile these two scholarly opinions on Heroides with one another. But that, again is in a very nascent stage.

**Aven:** Oh no, that's really interesting. Yeah, I've looked at the McCloud book briefly when we were looking at stuff trying-- when we were trying desperately to find out the origins of what was it, it was the...?

**Mark:** --Image of the soul leaving a body and becoming an angel and floating up.

**Aven:** That sort of trope in comics and more importantly in cartoons and film. Yeah.

**Mark:** And then, you know, sometimes you see the pulling back of the soul, stuffing it back in the body.

**Aven:** And we were trying to find like when that [00:51:00] started, not that McCloud talks about that, but you know, people kept pointing at it, I kept asking on Twitter and elsewhere, like 'who's written about the history of comic tropes and comic images?' And of course his name kept coming up. And so I did look at the book and I've only skimmed it, but it's really fascinating. And we do need to go back to it. But that particular thing was not a thing he was talking about, particularly.

We never did really-- we kind of, sort of figured something out, but we never pinned it down.

**Natalie:** I'd be really curious to know where--

**Aven:** -- you can watch our video on gospel! That was a video where, because Mark went into the soul a bunch of stuff about souls, but there's a bunch of stuff about comics in that. Oddly in that one, not in the two videos you have on comics, the video on superheroes and the video on Marvel. Yeah. Those ones, we didn't look at that stuff, but yeah, there's a whole nexus of interesting things there. The other question I have about all of that, when you're talking about the one moment that has temporal [00:52:00] depth, even though it's also a moment, which is sort of what you're saying. Do you tie, or have you thought about tying theory and discussion of ekphrasis into that then?

**Natalie:** Oh, I love this question! Yes. Yes, I have.

**Aven:** I imagined you would have.

**Natalie:** I actually-- sorry, I love this question because it's a great way for me to promote myself. And I have an article coming out actually, on the ekphrasis of Catullus 64 within the next month. It should be coming out in the-- it's sort of a comics journal. It's called Image and Narrative. It's a digital journal, so you can access it for free. And in that I talk a lot about-- I mean, you know Catullus, you love Catullus, you probably know it-- you do know it better than I do.

A summary for a listener: Catullus 64 essentially, it's called an epyllion. So it's like a little epic and it it's the marriage of Thetis and Peleus, who are Achilles' parents and midway through the poem, they're gifted this bedspread that shows [00:53:00] Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus and then her discovery by Bacchus and their marriage. And a lot of scholars have talked about this ekphrasis as being unusual for a number of reasons. There's dialogue in it, for one thing. And there's obvious temporal progression. And so in this article that's coming out, I talk about how-- actually this really ties into something Mark, you were saying about the way verb tenses are used. I talk about how if we look at this again, from the perspective of comics, we see the way Catullus is actually using a lot of very similar devices to what are used in comics to show movement, to show temporal progression, to show sound in a medium where all three of those things are basically impossible to show in reality. Like, you can't put time on a page, you have to turn it into space like you were saying, Mark, you can't put sound on a page. You have [00:54:00] to use onomatopoeia or you have to use letters to represent sound. And essentially I talk in this article about how in Catullus 64, Catullus does essentially the same thing that comics artists do in order to demonstrate in order to to make this a narrative ekphrasis. So yes, I do look at ekphrasis a little bit.

**Aven:** Absolutely. Cause yeah-- the locus classicus of ekphrasis is Achilles' shield in the Iliad, which Hephaestus is building. And there there's always--much is made of the fact that things are happening on that shield, that couldn't happen on a shield, there's movement, there appears to be movement, but then there's this whole discussion about whether what we're seeing is if the movement comes from Hephaestus creating it or from the static image afterwards, you know, whether the static image isn't a static image because it's divine or whether it's only not static because we're actually seeing the process of Hephaestus creating it. And that's what's giving it the movement.

This is again, not [00:55:00] news to you, Natalie, but just to set the background. But yeah, because I wonder-- thinking about a Heroid-- one of the Heroides, one of those poems, I'm thinking of one of them as an ekphrasis.

**Natalie:** Ooh, I like that!

**Aven:** --is where my mind went. Cause when you start talking about it as being like a comics panel, then that in my head, made it into a visual moment. And then I wonder if thinking about that-- they're long, some of them quite, but you know, that moment rather than as a series of comic panels-- though, that too-- I mean there's like, and being Ovid, the likelihood is a) different poems are going to want to work differently and b) many of these things are going to be simultaneously true of most of the poems, because that's how Ovid is. There's never one answer to any question you ask. But still, the idea of thinking of like one of those poems as an ekphrasis itself, as being Ovid's answer to the Ariadne panel [00:56:00] in some ways. I don't know, take it, that's where my brain stops. I have no more with it, but I--

**Natalie:** I really like that. I mean, I don't know if anyone thought of Heroides as ekphrasis. But, I mean, the Ariadne episode in Heroides, I don't remember the number of it, is, I mean, it's clearly based on Catullus' ekphrasis, so that's a really interesting idea. I wish I had something more to say, then that's really interesting.

**Aven:** Well, and, I'm going to be honest, I haven't even read all of the Heroides. I have only so many hours of the day. What can I say? I may have read them all in translation at some point. I can't remember, but I certainly have not like, focused on them or spent a lot of time working on them.

So I have no idea if this works in the slightest for any of them, but even if someone doesn't want like, go as far as to say, one of those poems is an ekphrasis. Some of the theory around how ekphrasis works might be an interesting way of approaching the poems with some of that [00:57:00] theory, anyway.

**Natalie:** Well, what I was thinking of when I was just thinking of one of the Heroides, a Heroidie, I'm not sure, as a comics panel was-- in comics, if you're trying to sort of show movement in a single frame, there's all sorts of ways of doing it. And you know, motion lines, the relative positioning of props and there's one way is you actually replicate an individual figure somewhat translucently so it's like, you know, we can't really see them, but you see them in different positions within the same panel doing different things, basically pacing around--

**Aven:** --or trying to open a box or whatever the thing is that they're trying to do, yes. So then that can read visually as steps in the process, right?

**Natalie:** Yeah, that's how I have sort of been conceptualizing the Heroides. But again, imagining it as ekphrasis, that really opens up an interesting dimension, not only in terms of the visuality of the texts and the temporal progresses as we've been talking about, but [00:58:00] you of course then in Heroides get discussions about the way epistles fundamentally transcend time.

And what you're doing when you write a letter is you are sending someone a moment in your life that they will then have access to at a different time. And then again, imagining that visually, I don't know if there's anything there, but it just-- my brain is connecting things.

**Aven:** Well, that after all is our goal. Okay. So maybe we'll take this opportunity then to pause for today, because I think we've been talking for awhile. And clearly we all have to go off and ponder now.

But this has been really fascinating and yeah, if you go off and do a few more Arctic expeditions or write a few more comic related things, we can always have another conversation or maybe we'll have you on to talk about like a superhero movie in the future or something.

**Natalie:** You two are very interesting people and I've loved listening to what I have listened to your podcast, so I'm always happy to come. [00:59:00]

**Aven:** Thank you so much.

**Mark:** Thank you.

**Aven:** This has been, yeah, totally fascinating. Now, if people want to find more of your work, I will put links to-- if that article has come out by the time we post this episode, there's some tense problems in my sentence there--

**Mark:** It's a moment, frozen in time.

**Aven:** It will have come out by the time I will have then later posted this episode, I will put a link to it. The one about Catullus 64 a and I'll link a couple of other things you've referenced. But where can people find you to continue this conversation if they'd like?

**Natalie:** Oh, well, I am very active as you know, Aven, on Classics Twitter, so they could probably follow me. I am @mazonianfeline-- so 'Amazonian', 'feline', but the 'a' of Amazonian is the '@'. I do also run the Classics Twitter Comics, which is a reading group that we read a Classics-themed comic every month. And then we have discussions on Twitter about that. So if anyone's interested [01:00:00] in that, they could also follow that hashtag.

**Aven:** Yeah, great! And when other stuff comes out, I'm sure you will mention it on Twitter and people can-- I mean, it is the responsibility of anybody who writes something to tell other people about it, because how on earth otherwise are we ever going to find it and read those interesting things?

That's not self promotion, it's a, it's--

**Mark:** A service to the community.

**Aven:** A service to the community!

**Natalie:** --a service. I like that. Yeah. Advertising as service. I like that idea.

**Aven:** --advertising ought to be. Well, so thanks again for sharing all of this with us.

**Natalie:** And thank you both so much for having me and for such an interesting discussion.

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**Mark:** Bye!