

Book Review: “*Ice: Nature and Culture*”

Ice: Nature and Culture / Klaus Dodds. London: Reaktion Books. 2018. (ISBN: 9781780239057)

In “*Ice: Nature and Culture*” (2018), Klaus Dodds gives the slippery and ephemeral material centre stage to show how ice is not only fascinating but fundamental to human life itself. As part of Reaktion Book’s *Earth* series, Klaus Dodds’ exploration of ice is both a literary and visual pleasure to read, with beautiful colour photos throughout the book. As the title suggests, it engages both the natural and cultural in order to show how the elemental influence our existence. In this way, the book speaks to recent human geographical interest in the multiplicity of materialities – demonstrating how the convenience of ice-cubes or the inconvenience of frosty layers on windscreens are linked to wider questions of science, geopolitics, imagination, and survival.

It is no exaggeration to say that the book’s couple of hundred pages are wide-ranging. Having noted the distinction between discovery and exploration (p.51), Dodds’ endeavour must be described as exploratory: He starts with the natural phenomenon prior to the human and traces it through its many manifestations in what would represent nearly every academic discipline. On his way through the *inter alia* glaciological and philosophical, he does not “discover” but instead acknowledges the multitude of stories through which ice is known, felt, and engaged.

Among these stories there are perhaps unsurprisingly more from the polar regions, but this does not mean there is not a diversity of perspectives. Dodds includes icy events and reflections from Asian festivals to Alpine heights, from kitchen fridges to gothic fiction. As the reader will see throughout the book: “For the polar explorer, the shamanist and the fantasy novelist alike, ice and snow are literary and oral alchemy – turning ordinary stories into epics” (p.21). Although it is not a long book, you will have travelled around and across the world more than once by the end of its seven chapters.

The book is not, however, what would be considered a traditionally academic book. It is only lightly referenced and moves swiftly from topic to topic, allowing us to know only the tip of the metaphorical ice-berg if not the literal one. If you wish to fully understand Siberian permafrost or Antarctic Treaty-negotiations, a deeper dive in the literature would be needed. Yet, that is also not the aim of the book, presenting us instead with thought-provoking excursions into the rich “nature and culture” of ice.

For a book of this length and scope, there is not much to criticise. Much more could be said about life from, in, with, and on ice, but that would require a different book too – one that was materially heavier, longer, and likely less illustrated. However, ephemeral as ice is and as the book’s final reflections state, we may soon revisit the book as one of the past. Our relationship to ice is no longer just a matter of seasonality; we are seeing decreasing amounts of ice writ large, as the Earth’s sheets and caps (re-)turn to a liquid state. This is therefore a book of the present, prompting us all to consider ice’s value: for imagination and fascination, threat and annoyance, fun and games – and most of all, for earthly life itself.