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North by northeast

by [Peter Schwendener](#)

Review of *The Friends of Freeland* by Brad Leithauser

Freeland, the imaginary locale of Brad Leithauser's new novel, is a group of islands situated in the North Atlantic. Its capital, Thorskrist, is "the northernmost capital in the world, and may well be the smallest"—the country's morose population is around sixty thousand. The people of Freeland survive on fish, and are heavy drinkers yet also prudish, maintaining a set of punitive drinking laws the narrator calls "surreal."

The novel opens in the wake of a disaster, the discovery of a dead teenager "who was last glimpsed alive at an impromptu party in a parking lot behind one of our discotheques." There is a growing malaise in the country, and its president, Hannibal Hannibalsson, addresses the scandal of the boy's death in a rambling oration that seeks to revive a sense of Freeland's proud past. Standing on a park bench in downtown Thorskrist, near a statue of Erik the Other (who founded the country in A.D. 980), he shakes off a hangover enough to ask the equally hungover crowd, "Who with mere words can add to this tragedy anything of more value than a pickled herring?" Narrating all of this is his oldest friend and adviser, Eggert Oddason, who compares Freeland's tawdry present to a "solider past" when "we *had* no discotheques." Freeland is becoming dangerously like America and the rest of the world "Down Below."

The president, who while delivering the speech is observed by the narrator to have a "brown substance" on one side of his head that turns out to be dried vomit, has been in office for twenty years, and has promised to step down before the next election. It is generally believed, by his countrymen as well as by his gap-toothed mistress, Rut Bjartardottir, that Freeland needs a more with-it chief executive. Inconveniently, Hannibal has a "vision" that convinces him he must run for one more term, and the vision is seconded by the crone Thorgunnur Sigurdardottir, his old schoolteacher who now lives in an Eldershelter, or nursing home. His holy mission, she tells him, is to ensure the return to Freeland of the only copy of its national epic, *The Freeland Saga*, "stolen" several centuries ago by Icelanders ("never mind," grumbles the skeptical narrator, "that it was almost surely written by an Icelandic, almost surely in Iceland, about an Icelandic expedition").

This vision sets the novel in motion, dispersing its action to warmer parts of the globe, principally Detroit and Cambridge, Massachusetts. The American parts of the book, which are set a couple of decades before the Freeland election, constitute the *Bildungsroman* of its narrator, Eggert Oddason. As Freeland's Poet Laureate, Oddason believes that it is his duty to amass, by travel or other means, as much experience of the world Down Below as he can, the better to bring "modern letters to my backwater nation." He swells his word-hoard with American slang, intoxicated by "the country where a man might at last say attaboy, bamboozle, chippie, dibs, eagerbeaver, feedbag, gams," and

has translated Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and other foreign works into Freelandic. A twitching mass of literary and erotic ambition, he has written forty-nine books (he writes another one before the novel is over) and will sleep with any woman who can surmount an aversion to his appearance, which he repeatedly describes in terms such as "Hamster-faced." He contrasts sharply with Hannibal, who may have vomit on his head but also has archaic dignity and "a consummate athlete's grace," the latter surviving from an earlier career as Freeland's greatest Olympic contender. Hannibal "lacks the vocabulary of self-doubt"; he and the itchy narrator are, respectively, the naïve and sentimental poets of their country.

This is, if not exactly a novel of ideas, a novel about idealism. Freeland, though lavishly and expertly described, has from the beginning of the book a certain hazy quality that resists too much concrete information. If it resembles any place in particular it is not its near neighbors Iceland or Greenland but the Zembla of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, or maybe one of Swift's imaginary countries without the Swiftian bile or paranoia. To Eggert Oddason, who almost intrusively keeps telling the reader how much he loves the place, its treelessness, sunlessness, and general emptiness are powerful spurs to literary imagination:

It wasn't to enact the poignant tragedy of a flower clipped before its bloom that I was placed upon this earth. No, I was deposited here to embody fullness and fruition. . . . Rat that I am, I'm also an arctic fox—wasn't I also intended to create, from worthless scraps of fustian, the modern Freelandic novel, the modern Freelandic play, the modern Freelandic poem?

The place has a paradoxically rich featurelessness that sends its residents, as well as Leithauser's readers, scurrying back to their own imaginations to fill in its gaps.

The aging Hannibal confronts, as his political opponent, a genial younger man named Nonni Karlson, who hires a gruesome trio of media specialists from the States to run his campaign; they teach him "to grin while being asked a question and to say *I have a three-part answer to that* even if he subsequently demonstrates he cannot count up to three." The attempt at political satire, which seems to require a mildly depressed sensibility, is perhaps too much at odds with this novel's expansiveness, its delight in its own inventiveness. The most effective satire centers on Freeland's avid yet strangely deglamorized consumerism. The tables at a popular Freelandic flea market are burdened with international cast-offs, among them a cactus, a tin of English tea, "seven cans of a Scottish antiperspirant called Mist o' the Morning," and "a shrink-wrapped copy of Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*."

There are one or two metafictional flourishes, as when Eggert bewails "the straitened, distorting business of narrative selection"; on the whole, however, the complexity here is human and interesting rather than literary and annoying. The reader's sense of Freeland's miragelike quality grows as the book nears its end, and the story concludes in a kind of blaze of mysticism. Hannibal narrowly loses the election to Nonni Karlson, but is reconciled with his mistress, Rut, who had been enraged by his decision to run again, and copulates with her on a bed of moss as the entire archipelago is engulfed by "a colossal bubble of balmy Caribbean air" that drifts up the Gulf Stream. Later, squeezing her arm as they look out over the sea he somewhat eerily (or is it affirmatively?) says, "Those countries Down Below are a passing affair. . . . Don't you see? In the end, only Freeland is real." Whatever its metaphysical status may be, Freeland is, like the rest of the book, a dauntingly solid fictional achievement.

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