

The Sleeping Land

Ella Alexander

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Archaeology department graduate students encounter more than mere relics on an expedition gone wrong in Ella Alexander's wry novel *The Sleeping Land*.

Kit, Val, and Mark exist in uneasy alliance under their department head, George, a controversial scholar "around whom the world bends." Tapped to accompany him on a dig in Siberia after the fall of the USSR, they pack in haste. Mark postures to impress George; Kit piques George by acting as his equal; and Val learns that she can have George if she wants him. Contending with mosquitoes, slim rations, and at first lackluster dig results, they convene beneath a cave in the tundra, camping out and wondering too little about the shadows that move beyond their tent walls at night.

George's secrets, and his team's festering competitiveness, threaten the expedition's unity. Further, after their mutual seduction, George convinces Val to break dig protocol in the cave; her other colleagues are appalled and incensed, though the resultant discoveries could make their careers. But there's more to this location than stunning paintings: George's perimeter cameras reveal the beings behind the dark eyes peering out from the bush.

Its narrative focus shifting between the three students, each of whom is sure that they know better than the rest, the novel is flush with dark humor and rewarding intrigue. What at first seems like a post-Soviet academic mystery is soon revealed to be more fantastical. Still, the concerns that trouble the trio most are typical of academia itself: reputations, credit, and advancement. By the novel's violent last act, little is certain beyond the fact that they've all been bamboozled by their charismatic leader—and that, even betrayed, they crave the triumph within their reach.

The Sleeping Land is a delightful send-up of academia in which ambition blinds students to the dangers around them.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2025)

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