

For A Cold Treat This Winter, Dip Into Polar Lit

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

During one sweltering summer back in the '90s, all I wanted to read about was the Arctic. I was living in Washington, D.C., and every day on my walk to work I'd pass a beautiful old townhouse with a bronze plaque on the front that said, "Admiral Robert E. Peary, Arctic Explorer, lived here." I'd be distracted for a moment with thoughts of icebergs and frosty ships — pleasant things to contemplate on those scorching city streets. One day in a Dupont Circle bookshop I found Barry Lopez's "Arctic Dreams" and snapped it up, and because Caroline Alexander's book "The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition" had just come out, I snapped that up too. That August, I girded myself against the hot metropolis with any book I could find that had snow on the cover.

I've since lost my copy of "Arctic Dreams," but its passages on the ethereal qualities of ice, and the trepidation and mystery surrounding the polar bears Lopez encountered, have stayed with me over the years. So have the hauntingly lucid black-and-white images in Alexander's book, reproduced from glass-plate negatives salvaged from Shackleton's grueling 1914 Antarctic journey. The photographs in "The Endurance," taken by Frank Hurley, make every detail of the expedition feel present, from the creases in the crewmen's weathered faces to the contour lines on the "ice flowers" that cropped up one day in the Weddell Sea.

I escaped that summer to "Terra Incognita," too, Sara Wheeler's wonderful travelogue about her 1995 sojourn on the southernmost continent as a National Science Foundation fellow. Her portraits of the scientists, pilots, artists, travelers and dreamers she meets as she wends her way across Antarctica from one U.S. base to another are as vivid as her descriptions of the natural spectacles she beholds. Characters like "Seismic Man" and "Frozen Sausage Bill" are colorfully drawn; so are curving icefalls, Mount Erebus and the Southern Lights, whose "iridescent coppery beams roamed among the stars like searchlights," Wheeler writes.

I was thinking about my summer of polar literary exploration as we assembled, at Snow Library last week, a wintry-themed book display for January. We propped "Endurance" front and center, alongside books

like "Icebound: Shipwrecked at the Edge of the World," Andrea Pitzer's recently published chronicle of a 16th century Dutch cartographer's efforts to find a trans-Arctic passage from Europe to Asia. We set out "An Empire of Ice: Scott, Shackleton, and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Science," by Edward J. Larson, with a photograph of three disheveled explorers starkly outlined against a backdrop of frozen sea.

We lined up books on penguins ("Learning to Fly:

My Escapades with the Penguins of Antarctica" by Ron Naveen) and polar bears ("The Polar Bears Are Hungry" by Carol Carrick).

We also included — for young Cape Codders, especially — "Captain Mac: The Life of Donald Baxter MacMillan, Arctic Explorer," by Mary Morton Cowan. Born in Provincetown, the son of a sea captain, "Danny" MacMillan grew up on the bustling harbor front, mingling with sailors who told him tales of massive icebergs in the northern seas. In 1908 he was invited by Admiral Peary to join an expedition to the North Pole. Later MacMillan would lead his own voyages north aboard the schooner Bowdoin, and by 1954 he'd made more than 25 trips to the Arctic, bringing back photographs, Inuit artifacts, even a stuffed polar bear.

Today, no contemplation of polar climes comes without a sense of foreboding or unease. Climate change has accelerated a warming that MacMillan was already noticing back in the mid-20th century. In "Captain Mac," Cowan notes that MacMillan found veins of coal in the Arctic, indicating parts of it were once green, and that the explorer predicted it would eventually become temperate again.

"For 40 years I have been watching that ice slowly, slowly melting away," MacMillan said.

The ephemeral quality of these extremities of earth, or their changeableness, is perhaps part of the fascination they hold for explorers, or travelers, or writers, or readers. It lends gravitas to something as mundane as putting together a library display. We dare not think, yet are forced to think, that these wondrous places may turn out to be nothing but an Arctic dream, as Lopez put it — that words and pictures might someday be all that's physically left of the resplendent polar landscapes, or their wild inhabitants.

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