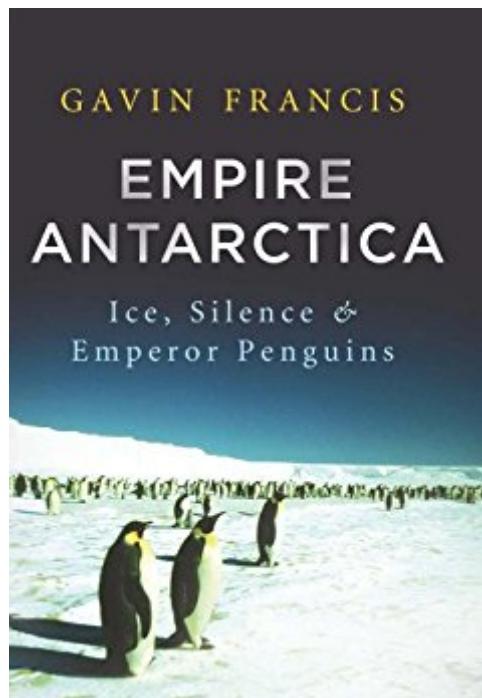


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Empire Antarctica: Ice, Silence, And Emperor Penguins



Synopsis

Gavin Francis fulfilled a lifetime's ambition when he spent fourteen months as the basecamp doctor at Halley, a profoundly isolated British research station on the Caird Coast of Antarctica. So remote, it is said to be easier to evacuate a casualty from the International Space Station than it is to bring someone out of Halley in winter. Antarctica offered a year of unparalleled silence and solitude, with few distractions and a very little human history, but also a rare opportunity to live among emperor penguins, the only species truly at home in the Antarctic. Following Penguins throughout the year -- from a summer of perpetual sunshine to months of winter darkness -- Gavin Francis explores the world of great beauty conjured from the simplest of elements, the hardship of living at 50°c below zero and the unexpected comfort that the penguin community bring. Empire Antarctica is the story of one man and his fascination with the world's loneliest continent, as well as the emperor penguins who weather the winter with him. Combining an evocative narrative with a sublime sensitivity to the natural world, this is travel writing at its very best

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Customer Reviews

The author longs to be the 'zdoc' - the doctor who winters over at the British Halley Antarctic station- and lo and behold gets the job. His explanations of why he wants to do this in the first place are as interesting as his descriptions of what it is like to watch everyone else leave and then hunker down, both physically and psychologically, with the small winter crew as they each do what they do- cooks and mechanics and scientists- through a long Antarctic winter. His descriptions are so evocative that even though this is a place incredibly unlike anything most of us have ever seen, we can get a flavor of the place, the weather, the people, the light, the ice, the dark, the heroic history, and the amazing cycle of life of the Emperor penguins. Okay, sometimes maybe his language might have been just a bit too fanciful for my taste, but I will credit the intensity of the environment for this. I found myself feeling like the author must have- as I realized that the one year cycle of the story was winding down, I did not want it to end. I have read other captivating books on Antarctica, but this one is so personal that it really gives dimension to all the emptiness and silence he describes.

This beautifully written book is everything that a travel book should be. There is the personal experience of a long trip to Antarctica and wintering over with thirteen other people, each with his or her own strengths, weaknesses, and quirks, each battling emptiness differently. And there is nature - the ice, stars, and penguins. Reading this book I was frequently reminded of Arctic Dreams by Barry Lopez. The descriptions of the adventures of famous polar explorers, of what they experienced - cold, dark, misery, and sometimes glory - are wonderful. This book has been shortlisted for the Book of the Year award in Scotland and deservedly so. I highly recommend it.

I bought this book on the strength of a review from the Economist. The review didn't rave about the book but portrayed it as an interesting perspective of life by an intelligent author, clarified by the solitude of Antarctica and enhanced by the lives of the emperor penguins who kept the author company through the continent's long and dark winter. Various stories of the Antarctic are woven with the author's own experience in a way that break down the distinction between 'them' and 'us'. Somehow, the contrast of the author's matter-of-fact voice with the extraordinary experiences he describes brought the Antarctic to me. I have read various accounts of Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton but this was the first time I understood that these were, in reality, people who had an ordinary side to their lives from which the heroic came. I'd recommend the book to those who are

interested. Antarctica is the scene, but life is the play.

If you wonder what it would be like to spend a lot of time in a horribly unpleasant place, where the reward for making a mistake, or even just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, is death, you may be mildly interested in this tale of the life--make that existence--of a "winterer" at a "camp" in the Antarctic. It's zero fun, shared by a strange bunch of other self-flagellators, none of whom really accomplishes much other than finding out that it can be really unpleasant to work and live in a cold and unpleasant place. But there are better written, and more interesting, books about challenges to Mother Nature. "Endurance" describes the horrors of a wooden ship being crushed in Antarctic ice, well before radio communication allowed its hapless crew to summon a helicopter for their rescue. "Undaunted Courage," the incredible tale of the Lewis and Clark expedition of over 7,000 miles from St. Louis to the mouth of the Columbia River and back, subsisting, for the most part, on what animals they could kill, or plants they could forage. Perhaps more interesting books because the adventurers had a purpose in mind other than making their own souls feel better. Momentarily.

The author's love affair with metaphors and similes is like a moth's attraction to bright light. The excess of 'as' and 'like' is so excessive that it detracts from the story. That is just one glaring example of where the editor should have stepped in.

This is a very elegantly told story. Part biology, part geology, part medicine, part poetry. I read about 10 pages at a time because of its lyrical quality.

My spouse asked for the book as a gift. She read it almost non-stop and loved it. She learned a lot about things that interest her and was happy with me for getting it. And given the cloud system, I can download it on our second Kindle as well and read it too.

Fantastic work! Like I was there, except, fortunately, I did not have to be, cause its cold, claustrophobic and bitter. Yet pure, amazing and enlightening as well. A great read.

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