

Fifteen million years in Antarctica. Rebecca Priestley. 2019. Wellington, New Zealand: VUW Press. 384 p, paperback. ISBN 978-17-76-56224-4, NZD 40.00. Further details at <https://vup.victoria.ac.nz/fifteen-million-years-in-antarctica/>

Fifteen Million Years in Antarctica is a memoir by award-winning New Zealand academic, science historian and writer, Rebecca Priestley. Unlike her collection of Antarctic science writing, *Dispatches from Continent Seven* (2016), it is a highly personal account of her relationship with Antarctica.

When she first visits Antarctica in 2011, it fulfills a childhood dream. She captures most eloquently the strong emotions stirred for almost every first-time visitor. During two further visits she is, as a science communicator, effectively embedded, in the journalistic sense, with paleo-climatologists, biologists, geologists, and glaciologists. With them, she explores their physical and emotional landscapes at base and in the field. In turn, the scientists are portrayed as more than “beakers”; they have partners, families, worries of their own – as does the author. In fact, she worries a great deal, frequently involving a lot of tears, though these can be expressions of joy as well as sadness. Early in the book, I worried about her anxiety. Later, I confess, it became mildly irritating. Finally, I saw it as one of the book’s subtle metaphors linking transient human experiences of Antarctica with the unsettling sense of crisis caused through anthropogenic climate change abetted by geopolitics. Themes of loss, loneliness and (ir)responsibility ripple through the text while, on the surface, Rebecca meets scientists and explains their work by placing it in the context of the larger policy picture.

Geologically trained, she is comfortable revelling in the beauty of a leaf from 15 million years ago in the Friis Hills (p. 137), while her personal account is anchored in the immediate such as the need to eat and sleep wisely for the Antarctic conditions where one is never quite alone even in the most remote of locations. A third time frame extrapolates to a future in which her children’s lives will be impacted by the climate crisis and this is what marks the book apart from other contemporary Antarctic science memoirs. Such an ambitious span of epochs is problematic in science writing but appears quite effortless in her personal memoir. This is the book’s great strength. The gentle, personal approach opens up a much more awkward question, as noted on the back cover: “Rebecca Priestley longs to be in Antarctica. But it is also the last place on Earth she wants to go.” Her tears are as much a response to the unsettling compromises and complexities of the Anthropocene as they are a reflection of her childhood. Peoples’ dreams are more able to be realised than, perhaps, ever before while the moral implications of enabling those dreams is, when one is bold enough to challenge them, deeply conflicting. Her voice is distinctly New Zealand: refreshing, direct and unhindered by political niceties. Her language is open, expressive. At one point, when explaining research on the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, she muses: “Does the ‘policy-relevant’ science being done down here make any difference? Does the work I’m doing make any difference? What if it is already too late? What if we really are fucked?” (p. 300). As a hypothesis, it is not surprising that it leads to bouts of anxiety and tears. While the bluntness of the questions and anger in her voice may stray beyond the bounds of academic writing, perhaps it opens up questions that science should be asked and be asking of itself. Her anger goes further when she dwells on President Trump’s withdrawal of the USA from the Paris Agreement (p. 210–212) and other ramifications of his tenure. Indeed, the candid approach to Trump’s populism and its ramifications on the global stage, such as “the contemporary menace of ‘alternative facts’” (p. 313) is enabled by the openness of the memoir genre. She concludes by reflecting on her family obligations, her professional responsibilities and her ethical dilemmas and ends with a powerful statement of her own. Again this appears as a metaphor for a wider perspective and as a possible response to the issues raised in the quote from p. 300 and, in so doing, challenges the wider research community to reflect on those questions and its own response.

© Cambridge University Press 2019.

As a memoir, it is part of a re-emerging trend to take one of three approaches: a narrative drawn from personal experience, an account of something important or a narrative that moves back and forth in time. Priestley’s memoir includes all three elements: intense personal visits to Antarctica, the climate crisis and the geological eras suggested by the title. In so doing, it ranges from the highly personal (notably her anxiety) to a profound concern about our unsettling

times. It joins Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita* (1996), Nicholas Johnson's amusing *Big Dead Place* (2005) and, to a lesser extent, Chris Turney's *Shackled* (2017) in exploring the life of scientists in Antarctica. As an aside, she makes a profoundly sad note about Nicholas Johnson's suicide (p. 340). Like those memoirs, Priestley's book differs from Werner Herzog's documentary film "Encounters at the end of the world" (2007) by focusing more on the prosaic and personal than the entertaining and eccentric. There are also marked differences to the experiences on tourist ventures as described in Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), Helen Garner's *Short Black* (2015) and Jonathan Franzen's *The End of the End of the Earth* (2018). It is also quite distinct from the memoirs of Heroic Age explorers and contemporary adventurers which, often, focus more exclusively on the personal. While it shares similar topics to Franzen's travel memoir, it offers a fresh perspective for Antarctic science memoirs. As such the book, with its universal themes, deserves an international audience of scientists, armchair travellers and concerned citizens. However, unlike Franzen, she takes an optimistic stance on climate change – putting her faith in science and

human ingenuity to provide hope from the possibilities that could arise. While this could be seen to be overly idealistic, it is what she needs to cope with her anxiety, and in that she is unlikely to be alone.

This is a book for anyone who has been, or seeks to go, to Antarctica and wants to understand not just polar science but the researchers who generate scientific knowledge and the dilemmas they face in the current unsettling times. It should be read by anyone in science communication seeking to learn how to explain the climate crisis. It might not persuade climate change deniers to reappraise their standpoints or make policy-makers rethink their soft long-term targets but it could, hopefully, challenge the polar science community to consider how best they might serve the pursuit of knowledge. It does so in a highly personal, open and generous way. It does not hold back its anger or its tears. Perhaps it will encourage others to do the same. (Bob Frame, Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand (research@frameworks.nz)).

DOI: [10.1017/S003224741900072X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224741900072X)