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An Antarctic Centennial: Following in the Footsteps of Roald Amundsen

***In Antarctica: An Amundsen Pilgrimage* by JAY RUZESKY**

Nightwood Editions, 2013 \$24.95

Reviewed by **JENNIFER SCHELL**

Contrary to what its title might suggest, *In Antarctica*—a book of creative non-fiction—opens in a bank on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. With good humour and self-deprecating charm, author Jay Ruzesky describes his interactions with a straight-laced loan officer, confused by his request for funds to finance a trip to Antarctica to commemorate the centennial of Roald Amundsen’s 1911 expedition to the South Pole. Although the first chapter leaves the question in doubt, Ruzesky eventually manages to procure the money he needs for his voyage. The succeeding chapters alternately describe his adventures on the Southern Continent and imagine scenes in the famous Norwegian explorer’s life. More than just an admired historical figure, Amundsen is one of Ruzesky’s most revered ancestors, “my great-grandfather’s cousin.” Inspired by this special connection and motivated by dreams of adventure, Ruzesky explains, “my own quest . . . is not just a following of footsteps, it is a pilgrimage to the place where epic struggles played out, where heroes were made and died, and where the gods had announced their presence in the form of unknown and indescribable wonders.”

At the beginning of *In Antarctica*, Ruzesky attempts to convey large amounts of information—historical, biographical, autobiographical, and scientific—in a series of very short chapters. While the subject matter is interesting and Ruzesky is a

compelling storyteller, these portions of the book are somewhat disorienting. Within the first thirty pages, Ruzesky introduces readers to Amundsen, describes childhood fantasies of polar exploration, notes the scientific discovery of Antarctic fossils, elaborates the process through which he planned his 2011 expedition, explores the history of Antarctic cartography, explains the shifting nature of the geographic North Pole, and delves into early Antarctic travel writing, concentrating mostly on Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec’s eighteenth-century voyage to the Southern Ocean.

Eventually, Ruzesky settles into a more reader-friendly rhythm, alternating between chapters that address Amundsen’s life and ones that reflect upon his own. With respect to the former, Ruzesky occasionally falls into the sensational. This language is particularly evident in the chapters describing Amundsen’s affair with the married Sigrid Castberg. For the most part, though, Ruzesky delivers a lively and engaging account of the famous explorer’s numerous achievements. He also illuminates many of the bitter disappointments that Amundsen endured toward the end of his life. Throughout these chapters, Ruzesky provides readers with exciting tales of Antarctic adventure, often highlighting specific details about Amundsen’s use of sled dogs or his cold-weather coping strategies. He also gives readers important insight into the explorer’s character. In the following passage, Ruzesky describes a particularly difficult stage of the 1911 expedition:

On the far side of the [Devil’s Ballroom] was a slope of ice that would carry them out. The dogs tried to bite into it with their claws

but they skittered and slid. The men had to walk behind and force the sledges along, themselves sliding sideways as they pushed. In the middle of this drive, through what seemed a frozen hell, Amundsen thought of Sigrid. He saw himself dancing with her: him elaborate in the black suit he had worn to society functions as he was making preparations for the expedition; her in an elegant blue gown whirling sure-footed across the floor with him; her lips when she kissed him. And then his boot skidded sideways on the ice.

Above, Ruzesky adopts the strategy he consistently employs throughout the biographical portions of *In Antarctica*. Drawing on historical sources, he relates the day-to-day events of Amundsen's various expeditions. At the same time, he details what he imagines to be the explorer's thoughts and feelings as he progresses on his journey. Naturally, some historically-minded readers may dismiss these passages as fanciful or inaccurate. Still, Ruzesky should be commended for his creative approach to biographical writing. After all, he manages to humanize Amundsen in a way that many history books and websites do not.

By far, *In Antarctica's* strongest passages are those that address the author's transformative personal experiences on the Southern continent. For some reason, though, Ruzesky spends the first one hundred pages of *In Antarctica*—almost half of the book—describing his travels to Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires. In these sections of the book, Ruzesky visits Pablo Neruda's house and Iguazu Falls, as well as various beaches,

restaurants, and zoological parks. Although Ruzesky is a talented travel writer and he makes the most of his material, the presence of these chapters in a book entitled *In Antarctica* is unexpected. No doubt, these digressions were prompted by the logistics of the trip, for Ruzesky invited his brother to be his cabinmate on the journey to Antarctica, and his brother, in turn, expanded the itinerary to include the aforementioned South American destinations. Still, in his acknowledgements, Ruzesky notes that "This story, while fictional, is based on actual events. In certain cases incidents, characters, names and timelines have been changed for dramatic purposes." This statement raises the question: Why not take more poetic license with the subject matter?

When Ruzesky finally reaches Antarctica, his prose markedly changes. His excitement is palpable and his words are scintillating. He fills page after page with vivid descriptions of icebergs, glaciers, seals, and penguins. Into these passages, he weaves some thoughtful introspection:

To be in Antarctica is to be in a landscape that is at once empty and also very rich and full. It is empty of other people. No planes fly overhead on the way to somewhere else; no wires cross above or underground or undersea; there are no roads, no cars, no lawnmowers working in the distance on a sleepy Sunday morning; no dogs barking, no stereos pointed out the back of someone's door while they wash the car, no church bells. There is me and this ship and its passengers and crew. There is the sky that slouches in a low ceiling of cloud cover. Early sealers and whalers heard this sky

telling them where the ice was. The ice itself is not a blank page. How can there be so much colour in snow? It is as though some magician at the end of a wall of ten thousand paint chips pulled back a panel by the light edge of colour to reveal ten thousand more shades of white. What compels is our absence. No towns, no roads. The main thoroughfare in Antarctica is the one thousand kilometres of wide-open ocean that is the Drake Passage. There is a hostile beauty here. Beautiful because of the scale, the absolute grandeur of Antarctica overwhelms, and it is hostile because it would be so easy to die here.

Here, Ruzesky is clearly in his element as a travel writer steeped in Antarctic lore. His

passion and enthusiasm is contagious. And he gives readers who may never visit Antarctica a striking vision of one of the earth's last remaining wilderness environments. Such passages richly reward readers patient enough to persevere through the book's more digressive early chapters.

JENNIFER SCHELL is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her specialties include early American literature, transnational studies, and environmental humanities. Her book "*A Bold and Hardy Race of Men*": *The Lives and Literature of American Whalers* was recently published by the University of Massachusetts Press. While she has not visited Antarctica, she has travelled to Eagle, Alaska where Roald Amundsen used the telegraph to inform the world of his successful navigation of the Northwest Passage.