

# Helen Cowcher

## FAQ's about the book ANTARCTICA

### Have you ever been to Antarctica?

No I have never been to Antarctica.

I think that it is important that as few people go as possible because the environment there is so fragile.

### How did you get your idea?

I had just finished my first picture book RAINFOREST. I wanted to do something different. I had done a very 'hot tropical' book about a place where it rains every day. I had soaked my paintbrushes in bright colors, especially greens. I changed to thinking of a 'freezing-cold' book about a place where it never rains. I used blues, whites and grays. And as I read about it I grew more interested. It became more and more wonderful ! And I knew that I must do the book.

### Why did you choose to paint Emperor penguins?

I love dramatic pictures. I could imagine the emperors in the dark months of winter and I thought of the great paintings I could paint of that scene and of the colored lights in the sky : the Aurora Australis.

For my visual story to work well, I had to choose the emperors because they are the only penguin who can stay there in the coldest darkest time of year and have their chicks in winter. And that is a fantastic story in itself. Of course they cannot get food because they must look after the egg on top of their feet all the time. So the males lose half their own body weight by the time the chick hatches and their mate returns from sea. But because they are such a large penguin they can still survive. I couldn't believe it, it was so amazing and I always find such things inspiring.

### How did you do the book without going to Antarctica?

There was no internet for the general public to use. There were no documentaries like 'Life in the Freezer' 1993 or movies such as 'Happy Feet' 2006 to watch, when I did my book. Those came along several years later. So I read about Antarctica in old books and magazines, I looked at photos of penguins, and at penguins in a zoo. I visited a museum and saw clothes and tools used by the early polar explorers. Anything to make me understand what Antarctica is like.

Now there is lot more material to look at which you could use to help with your picture book story if you wanted to make such a book.

The important things are to find a good story to tell about something that interests and inspires you. And then to create pictures which also tell the visual story in which your 'reader' sees and feels many things which are not mentioned directly in the text. "Pictures speak louder than words!"

When I make my books, I always try to imagine what it would be like to be in such an extreme place and then transfer that impression onto the page.

### How do you make your books so real?

Atmosphere is very important and so is concentrating hard when you are either drawing or painting. I used a lot of dry brushwork and cool colors.

And I thought about the light ( or lack of it ) a lot and how that would affect my pictures. When I was painting ANTARCTICA with the ice landscape, blizzards and penguins in the darkness of the freezing polar winter, I was actually painting in my studio, in the bright hot light of an English summer! So I tried very hard to imagine that I was freezing and the skies were dark, and describing in 'my mind's eye' the conditions for the penguins, so that the paintings rang true.

### Is it easy to decide which place to make a book about and when to do it?

Well it was the right time to do ANTARCTICA. But often it is impossible to tell because things can change in the world so fast. And doing a book from start to finish is a very slow process.

ANTARCTICA was published when the World Wide fund for Nature ( WWF) and Greenpeace were campaigning for the Antarctic to be made into a World Park. This ice- covered land would be safe from mining exploration for at least 50 years. This actually came about with all the nations , who lay claim to Antarctica, signing a global treaty. The strong case for conservation captured the hearts of the public and there was an incredible amount of interest and enthusiasm. WORLD PARK Antarctica continues to be a special place for scientific collaboration and conservation. Its' status is especially important now that the effects of climate change are being investigated and Antarctica has a very important scientific station where this is monitored.

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