



THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW MAY 1990 -US

Is the South Pole Safe for Penguins?

ANTARCTICA *written and illustrated by Helen Cowcher,*

What can it mean that three books on Antarctica have just simultaneously appeared? To my knowledge, they are among the first ever on the subject written for young children, and the publication of three in a season undoubtedly marks some kind of deep change in our consciousness. I think the answer must lie in children's awareness of and interest in the environmental movement. Children sense, instinctively, that the fate of the environment has particular personal applications to them: will there be an earth, as we know it, when they're grown? Antarctica is a powerful symbol of the vulnerability of earth's resources. And indeed, two of the three books carry an overt environmental message. How effective these messages are is another matter. The best first. Helen Cowcher's ANTARCTICA is visually dazzling, with bold lines and deep saturated colors- the vivid yellow, black and orange color scheme of the emperor penguin serves as inspiration- against a multihued wash suggesting the complexity of the colors of Antarctica, snow and sky. Her message is interesting and subtle, though not beyond the understanding of a 5 year old: penguins have natural predators- a leopard seal lurks offshore, skua gulls wait for the chance to snatch eggs and chicks left unprotected. Man is seen as part of that continuum, but different. Oddly, considering the book's message, the human threat is presented as almost inadvertent. Man seems less of a villain than the lurking leopard seal, the greedy skua. A helicopter from a nearby base frightens the nesting penguins off their eggs and leaves them exposed to the skuas. The metal hull of a distant icebreaker crunches through the ice, making the Weddell seals anxious. Children can read their own moral message into this simple tale. Ms Cowcher, who is British, and whose first book was RAINFOREST leaves the implications unstated and the future open. 'The penguins and the seals have always shared their world with ancient enemies, the skuas and leopard seals. But

these new arrivals are more dangerous. The seals and penguins cannot tell yet whether they will share or destroy their beautiful Antarctica.....

Helen Cowcher's glorious pictures make her book worth owning whether or not the child has ever heard of Antarctica.

Katherine Bouton - An editor of The New York Times Magazine, went to Antarctica in 1979 under a grant from the National Science Foundation.

ANTARCTIC ESSENCES

BOOKSELLER 1 December 1989 – UK

Brian Wildsmith once explained to me his belief that as literacy grows as an art, other creative aspects decline, and that before the influence of Michelangelo or Leonardo led artists to draw more realistically, early painters had a “wondrous creative expression of what we are about—you might say, ‘That’s a bison’, but in fact it’s an expression of a bison, which transforms into graphic terms the bison-ness of a bison”. He would surely relish the way Helen Cowcher (of RAINFOREST) has developed. Her creatures in ANTARCTICA are indeed the very essence of themselves, while creating wondrous patterns on the page. The round-faced penguin chick, as pure in black and white as a logo, forms a pattern against its upright, long-beaked parents; the swirling movements of seal-shapes, or sinister swooping skuas, are dark patterns against a horizonless white or glowing wintry dusk; the luminous polar light makes patterns in the deep, cold water. And a huge, hypnotic close-up of a ferocious leopard seal stares out as balefully as Wildsmith’s own owl of long ago. Yet these superb designs impart real information as they tell of invading helicopters and ships, and their beauty conveys a terrible unease.

Stephanie Nettell - Children's book editor: GUARDIAN



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.

www.HelenCowcher.com | Helen@helencowcher.com