

Antarctica

Kim Stanley Robinson
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In the inside front cover of this book, it says that I bought **Red Mars** for Jim Davis on his 49th birthday, October 17, 1999 and in the same order got **Antarctica** as a treat for myself. I've spent most of *this* year trying to get it to "next" among other book priorities.

Antarctica is basically a story of Val, a large amazon-like guide of antarctic adventures on the "in their steps" theme, that is, rich people who think they are in reasonably good shape and reasonably skilled can pay big bucks to play like they were on one of the great expeditions -- Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton, and so forth, pretty much as they had been originally executed, using modern equipment, of course. The really crazy people try to do some parts of the adventures in period equipment and even clothing, up to the limits of safety of course. Reminds me of trying to play Beethoven on period pianos. Hard on the pianos....

Of course, it's the story of more than just Val, but she figures prominently in most of it. One of her better clients is Ta Shu, a Feng Shui master who is followed throughout on helmet-cam-radio by millions back home in China. Unannounced, chapters and sections of chapters will be his narrative: "blue sky, white snow," and how to walk on the earth in harmony with all that is, and so forth.

The time is the future, but not the distant future. Global warming has melted a lot of the ice off and the summers are ten degrees warmer than usual everywhere, which is pretty warm a lot of places.

Another main character is Wade, the personal assistant to a jet-setting U.S. Senator Phil Chase. They are always talking to each other on their wrist phones, not knowing or even trying to guess what time zone the other is in or what is going on on the other end.

The National Science Foundation still runs Antarctica but the treaty is in jeopardy, largely due to international drilling interest. And, a constant feature in K.S.R. novels, there are a group of "ferrels," that is, people living lightly off the land, following the rules, not leaving much of a mark, and sometimes taking things into their own hands.

But there is yet another group, pseudo-ferrels you might say, the eco-anarchists (my term, but reminiscent of the opening of **Green Mars**) who do things to sabotage heartless business and government. We meet some of them in California and they figure prominently, though more

anonymously, in the overall plot and action in the Antarctic. They are loosely organized and don't know much about each other but they have missions, kind of like terror cells.

Following in the footsteps of Amundsen (who ate his own sled dogs on the way to the pole and back) is a lot easier if you have gear made of smart fabrics that uses solar energy to keep you warm and keep things powered, if you have GPS and crevasse detectors, and satellite phones and, most importantly, helicopter rescue just a satellite phone call away at any moment. This was the case on the Amundsen footsteps trip that Val was leading up until they got into trouble. Trying to follow the *exact* route of Amundsen (including his mistakes) they climbed the more difficult side of a glacier that was not in near the shape it had been in over a hundred years before and when things went bad, as they inevitably will, lost all their equipment, and nearly two expedition members, down a deep crevasse.

The book, about sixty percent done at that point, and had started to get boring. OK, so people are drilling in the ice, and living on the ice, and odd things are happening, and Val is leading an expedition of cantankerous egotistical rich people. So? But now a catastrophe occurs: All the infrastructure is gone.

(One has to wonder how well one would do in urban Southern California under similar, technology deprived circumstances.)

But they'll be OK. Val regroups up top and tries to make the rescue call, only to discover that the anarchists have taken down everything that they can easily take down without killing anyone, GPS, communications, and *satellite coms* most notably.

(Reviewers note: You don't really take down GPS like that. GPS is receive-only. It is possible to jam it locally, but what happened here, a major regional outage, would be more difficult than he imagines. Also, Robinson suggests modes of radio operation and failure that, though they are plausible, wouldn't happen with radios today or in the near future. But this is just my professional bias creeping in. It's OK.)

So what are Val and the group going to do? As usual, the author leaves you for a couple of chapters to visit some other developing crises before you get back to Val and the snotty adventurers. They start out on a 100 km forced march to the nearest human encampment using, horror of horrors, a paper map. (At least they had a paper map with them.) When they get there, expecting to have rescued themselves, things are not much better. Another group, with Wade in it, has survived a major bombing of the drilling outpost, has serious problems of their own, and are about to get underway for their own tens-of-kilometers survival attempt.

To have said this much of the plot might already have spoiled it, so I won't go into it further here. That gives you the flavor of the narrative once the crises occurs. And, be patient - crises will occur.

Another main character is a guy called “Sandwich” at the beginning and “X” at the end. He has been Val’s lover just prior to the beginning of the book, having been a contract technician (the lowest of the low in the scientist dominated pecking order) at Mac Town (McMurdo) and one of the few men physically big enough to be her match. But, women are a shortage on Antarctica and can call any shots. He had been called “Sandwich” because he had been a fling between two other affairs. A common occurrence certainly; but a nickname that he did not like. And so he changed it to “X” and signed his name that way. Get it?

So in the opening of the book, X was the only human on an automated train of supplies from McMurdo to the South Pole when one of the cars was hijacked for ecotage. Who done it? That’s what Wade leaves the comfort of D.C. (a place his boss rarely visits except dropping in at the last minute for critical votes) to come down and see. He gets to tour the Amundson - Scott station at the South Pole, both the new one and the old, now abandoned geodesic dome. They do Robinson-esque outings of wild partying and playing, exploring where they shouldn’t, swimming in warmed pools down deep in man-made ice caverns. Later he visits an ice-methane drilling site, the one that got blown up while they were out on an inspection run. Barely enough is left to survive, and that only by accident. Then Val and her team show up. That’s the other end of that narrative.

An aside about the forced march. Val thinks a lot about guiding clients and it’s not much fun really. The guide is only as good as the weakest client and the weakest client is often the most egotistical and hardest to deal with. The guide has to be in charge, has to be strongest and most skillful, and has to make tough calls, both to do hard things for survival and to not do hard things, for safety. It happens again on this march. One client is in very bad shape and really wants to be left behind to die, but the guide can’t do that so she does things to keep him moving that violate his sense of personal superiority and as a result, he will never talk to her again, though he does indeed live through the ordeal. This brings back memories for Val of the disastrous “Footsteps of Shackleton” expedition where they even did the sea part in a period-sized boat and she’d had to manhandle a client similarly to save them on Elephant Island, resulting in the same social response.

As a result of all this, she decides to get out of guiding and join the ferrels. That won’t be easy either, but at least you are only as weak as yourself, not some difficult client.

As an outgrowth of the crises, and as people get back to safety and global systems come back online (and as the ferrels deal rather roughly with the ecotages) Sylvia, the director at McMurdo, gets everybody in a room together, including a lawyer for the ecotages, and after many sleep-deprived days, negotiation, and side-bars, they hammer out the next set of Antarctic agreements, in eight paragraphs that consume a whole chapter. The communique begins “1. The Antarctic Treaty should be renewed as soon as possible...” and ends “8. What is true in Antarctica is true everywhere else.”

Is this Robinson's suggestion for how to run the polar world? The world in general? The globally warmed world? Of course.

In the same way that the movie *Contact* provides an excellent view into the actual politics of science (as opposed to the romance of it), **Antarctica** looks at the politics of camps of thought in science, and the style and tedium of their execution. There are numerous trips out on the ice to camps where scientists of one school or the other are looking for and curating evidence for their points of view. The leaders and followers, tenured professors and graduate students, competing schools and approaches, are all explored. New discoveries are made and the rush is on to interpret them in ways sympathetic to each party's scholastic and social investment.

In the end, X becomes a real "sourdough" in the southern sense. He moves out onto a peninsula quite a distance out of town, a spot that Ta Shu helps him pick, and lives permanently in a tent walking or boating into McMurdo daily to work. He is no longer a wage slave but a partner in the new support corporation that many of the former employees formed as a cooperative, not a cut-throat employer.

Many of the elements that Robinson wants to see us move towards in the human situation are thus present, as they are in the Mars Trilogy. This is among the reasons that this book, among his others, is a great read. He has great sense of place, descriptive powers, and a deep understanding of the human elements in everything that he describes.

Reading **Antarctica** was fun, as expected. If I had known that men's book group was going to read **South, The Endurance Expedition** by Shackleton the very next month, I might have timed it differently. I spent the whole northern summer of 2010 freezing in the southern antarctic!