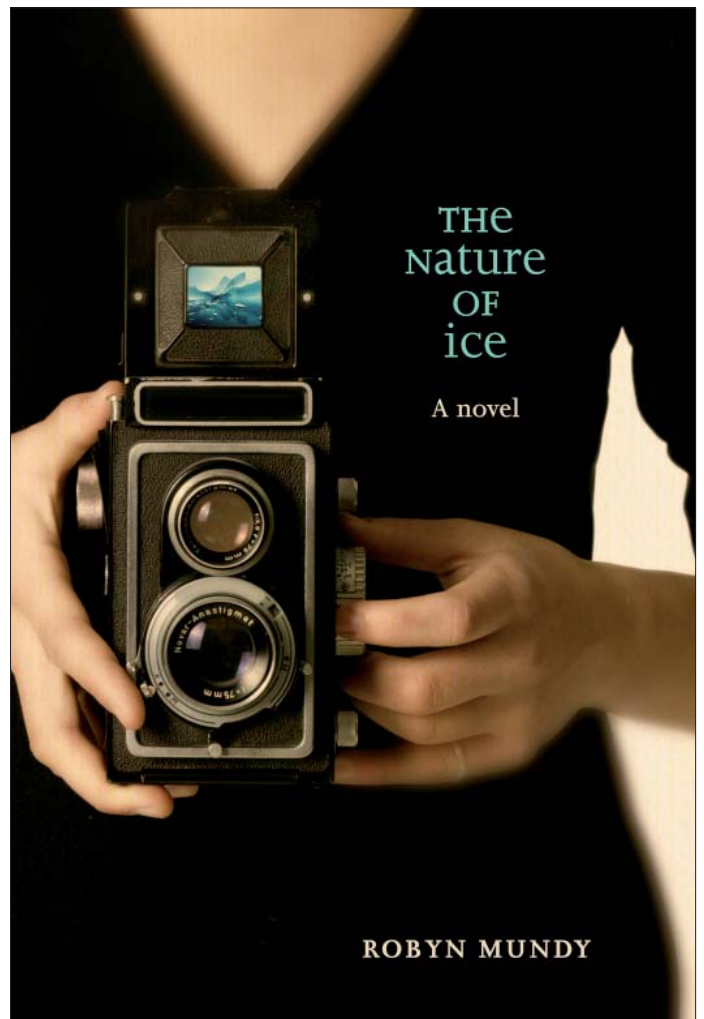


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About the author (2) Q&A (2)
Suggested points for discussion (3)
Further reading (4)

About the Book

Freya has come to Antarctica ostensibly to undertake a photographic expedition to retrace Frank Hurley's iconic photographs - but also to escape a stifling relationship. Once she is there, though, living in the cramped and close confines of Davis Station, the extraordinary world of Antarctica gets under her skin and she starts to unfurl, finding her world change in ways she would never previously have thought possible.

Weaving in a vivid recreation of Douglas Mawson's ill-fated 1911-14 Antarctic expedition into the contemporary story of a woman coming to terms with the end of her marriage, *The Nature of Ice* is a poetic, multi-stranded novel of present and past, hope and tragedy, love and loss. It is both a love story and a heart-stopping, intensely moving polar adventure story - most of all though it is a story of place, bringing to vivid life the extraordinary landscape of Antarctica, the frozen continent that intrigues us all.

About the Author

It was over a decade ago that Robyn Mundy first went to Antarctica, and she has managed to return there every year since, working as an assistant expedition leader for a Sydney-based eco-tour company. In the summer of 2003-04, she spent a season living and working at Davis Station, Antarctica, as a field assistant. In 2008 she over-wintered at Mawson Station, Antarctica, where she worked on an emperor penguin project. Robyn has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing from the University of New Mexico, USA. She wrote *The Nature of Ice* as part of a PhD in Writing at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia.

Robyn Mundy on writing *The Nature of Ice*

Why Antarctica?

In December 1996, buoyed up with excitement, I packed my bags to travel to Antarctica for the first time. I anticipated a voyage that would finally satisfy my lifelong craving to experience the frozen continent. The Australian polar explorer, Douglas Mawson, had been my hero since my teenage years, and the haunting story of his ill-fated 1912-13 sledging journey across the icecap simply added to the layers of appeal to go there. I did not imagine, when I set off, that I would return from that voyage fuelled with an even greater desire to return to Antarctica.

The novel's epigraph, *After Antarctica, nothing is the same*, underpins the outcomes for Freya, Chad, Douglas Mawson and Paquita Delprat. It also echoes the change that Antarctica has had on my life. That initial voyage led to a part-time career, working on ship-based tours to Antarctica with Aurora Expeditions, and later as a field assistant on science projects at Australia's Davis Station and Mawson Station.

When I set about writing the novel, I wanted to bring together two Antarctic stories across two time periods. The first, a contemporary story, the larger of the two, draws on my Antarctic knowledge and experiences. The second is a story told many times before in non-fiction. Through fiction, I thought it possible to combine scholarly research with creative writing to bring new life and meaning to the story of Douglas Mawson and his 1911-14 Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). The more I researched, trawling through correspondence and documents in archival

libraries, reading all the available journals from the men of the AAE, the more I saw that Mawson, undeniable hero that he was, had failings as a leader; he was a fallible man. Throughout the men's journals, Mawson is praised for his strengths and achievements and criticised for his faults. Yet even those who admired him did not look at him as a friend. I began to feel torn in my admiration of Mawson until I realised that here was a character all the more rich to explore in writing. Mawson's own journal provided important facts, and yet his sparing recordings gave me little insight into the man behind the man. What of his self-doubts, loneliness, friendships, longings, aspirations, disappointments, fears? How did Mawson survive a harrowing solo trek across the ice, while those around him perished? Finally, it was through the love letters that he wrote in Antarctica to Paquita Delprat, his 20-year-old fiancée, that I gained access to a tender, compassionate side of an intensely private man, one who was often regarded as aloof and austere.

After struggling with how I would splice together the two stories, I settled on a selection of black and white images from AAE photographer Frank Hurley. Hurley provided the bridge between Mawson's story and the contemporary story; he offered a vital link to Freya, whose own journey to Antarctica as a photographer, one-hundred years on, is inspired by his work.




Freya spends five months at Davis Station, where she is assigned the reluctant help of Chad McGonigal, a chippie and boat builder with 20 years Antarctic experience. As Freya and Chad are forced to spend time together in the field, their regard for each other slowly evolves in concert with Freya's private reflections on her stifling marriage. Chad, too, shields secrets from his past—events of a childhood that have shaped the 'diehard loner' he believes himself to be.

I wanted both stories—contemporary and historical—to explore how the extreme environment of Antarctica affects people who spend time there. I've tried to draw Antarctica not simply as a setting, but as complex and animate a character as any human figure. For Freya, for Chad, for Douglas Mawson, Antarctica becomes the place where human life hangs in the balance; survival is at the whim of a realm as harsh and terrible as it is pristine and beautiful.

I feel privileged to have been to Antarctica many times now, and to have twice participated in Antarctic science. I've been asked if I keep a journal of my Antarctic experiences. As a writer, it may seem odd that I do not. I strive to portray scenes filmically—photos perform an intrinsic role in that process. As I wrote *The Nature of Ice*, I constantly referred to my Antarctic photos, along with those of Frank Hurley, in the same way one might leaf through a diary to recall the faded details of a place, and rekindle all the feelings that go with it.

I hope you enjoy reading and discussing *The Nature of Ice*.

Discussion Questions

-  How does Freya's birthmark influence her as a character?
-  Frank Hurley's composites (two or more negatives blended together in the darkroom to create a composite photo) have been criticised as 'fakes'. Nowadays, image blending is an everyday part of our digital world. Do you feel that the criticisms against Hurley are justified?
-  What role do you think Hurley's photographs play in the novel?

- ☞ Freya says of her deceit, 'Whether you're the one away, or the one waiting at home, everything hinges on trust' (p. 277). How would you respond to a situation where a friend was deceiving his or her partner? Does your opinion of Freya change over the course of the novel?
- ☞ The Tasman Bridge disaster is a defining moment of Chad's childhood. Is there an event that has had a significant impact on you, growing up?
- ☞ How do you feel about Douglas Mawson—his leadership; his attitudes toward Paquita? How do the historical episodes in the novel inform or resonate with the contemporary story?
- ☞ Which character in the novel do you most identify with?
- ☞ Has reading *The Nature of Ice* altered your perceptions of Antarctica?
- ☞ The close of the novel marks a new beginning for both Chad and Freya. What do you think will become of them?

Recommended Reading

- ☞ The Sea Bed Marele Day
- ☞ The Great Arch Vicki Hastrich
- ☞ Musk and Byrne Fiona Capp
- ☞ This Everlasting Silence: The Love Letters of Paquita Delprat & Douglas Mawson
- ☞ 1911–1914 Nancy Robinson Flannery (Ed.)