

Bleaker House: Chasing My Novel to the End of the World



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Say you've just finished your graduate degree in writing from Boston College, and a rich donor provides you with funds to travel anywhere in the world. Where do you pick? Tahiti, Paris, Buenos Aires? For British citizen Nell Stevens, it's none of the above. Instead, she chooses the remote Falklands Islands, where South America meets Antarctica?in June, which is winter there.

In Stanley, the Falklands' capital, Nell researches the archives for her first novel, and also meets some of the less-than-friendly Falklanders there. After a few weeks, Nell hops a plane for even more remote Bleaker Island, about which a writer friend quips, "Oh, you're writing *Bleaker House*."

Although she loves the worlds captured in Dickens' work, this is not what Nell intended at all. She'll be the only person living on the island for most of her stay as she works on her novel's first draft: Bleaker Island has just two part-time residents, Alison and George (the other inhabitants include penguins, cows, and a terrifying bird of prey called a caracara). The solitude on the island whams Nell; the spotty internet and phone service don't help.

Most pressing, Nell has packed pounds fewer provisions than she should have. This leads her to ration her food: ten or twelve almonds a day, supplemented with dry soup, instant milk, and coffee. Before leaving Bleaker for the larger island, Alison, who has no idea of Nell's scant food supply, gives her a single potato. Each day after "doing her words," Nell picks it up, smells it, rubs her palms over it, and imagines all the ways she could prepare it, before placing it back on the counter. Too precious?she'll save it for later.

Each day Nell puts on layers of clothes?sometimes wearing every item of clothing she's brought?and takes long walks, visiting the penguins, a dark slimy cave, and as much of the coastline as she can without falling off cliffs. Interspersed between sections about exploring the islands and writing her novel, Nell includes a few autobiographical essays. Also, not traditional for a memoir, she adds some short stories.

As the month progresses, despite getting more and more hungry, Nell's words really start adding up, and she still hikes daily. Observing her long, skinny shadow before her one day, she notices the huge caracara diving just above her head. She throws her arms up and runs as fast as she can to an out building, and the caracara lands right above her, banging on the metal roof. Cowering, Nell hides until almost dark, and then hurries back to her place.

Mostly, this book chronicles discovery: the treeless hunk of windy rock in the South Atlantic Nell inhabits, and the people of a country that distrusts foreigners (the Falklanders believe this stranger was sent by the Argentinians because of their recent war with them).

And on Bleaker, Nell discovers herself, stronger and more capable than she had thought, and able to thrive in solitude without family and friends. On a hike shortly before leaving, she discovers a deep gorge where the sea pours in fierce and churning. Fascinated and inspired by the wildness and danger, Nell balances on its rim in a gale of wind until her fingers and toes grow numb.

Even if you're not a writer, you will enjoy this book. I loved learning what life is like in a place so isolated from much of the world, and Nell's description of the small rock she lived on are spot-on and thrilling. The lessons she takes away from the Falklands end up being very different from what she expected?yet in fact, *Bleaker House* is not bleak at all, but rich with adventure and opportunity.

Posted by Dory L. on August 2, 2017

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