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White Darkness, The

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Antarctica is the setting for this strikingly original and astonishing novel. At one level the book is surreal comedy played out in the wilderness yet there is some spectacular wickedness, and scope for appalled laughter. But I would summarise the novel's main effect more simply. It is terrifying, especially if Antarctica is already the last place on earth where you would wish to go.

McCaughrean's truly lovable heroine is 14-year-old Sym - shy, hard of hearing, devoid of sexual confidence, mocked by her precocious schoolmates. Sym, long schooled in the 'Ice' in general and the life and death of Captain Oates in particular, has internalised Oates as her secret ally and friend. She needs him badly when she is virtually kidnapped by Uncle Victor, not really an uncle but her dead father's business partner, for a journey to the White Continent. Bluff Yorkshire Victor is actually a clever and mad obsessive who believes the Earth is made up of concentric spheres and that the entrance to an inner world, through a portal called Symmes's Hole, exists in the Antarctic. All unknowing, Sym has long been chosen and trained up as his assistant, and now they are off. As their bizarre and frightening expedition takes its course, the true extent of Victor's perfidy is layer by layer revealed. His end is suitably Faustian. But Sym survives, thanks to her own superb resourcefulness and bravery (and Captain Oates), and returns to a believable last-page sexual glory which might let her say (as Richard III did), 'I do mistake my person all this while?.'

It is a wonderful tall story, and a kind of dark comedy, except for the cold. But the physical reality of Antarctica - beautiful, merciless, more homicidal than Uncle Victor - is depicted with mesmeric storytelling power, and rules the book. 'Great God!' wrote Captain Scott, 'this is an awful place.' It has inspired a unique and splendid novel for all readers over 12 - a 'crossover' book if ever there was one. PH

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