

Antarctica in Science Fiction

How about revisiting some of the most important early novels about Antarctica?

Poe and Coleridge turned the White Continent into a gothic locale, with their dark romantic novels. The region had set in train the ghastly experiences of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner", produced the culminating horrors of Poe's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" and spawned the hideous amorphous aliens of H.P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness".

Surprisingly, the first novel ever published about Antarctica, "Symzonia", was written before the continent was actually discovered, in the year 1820. The author was a firm believer in the 'Hollow-Earth-Theory' and this first book belongs hence to the proto-Science-Fiction line of Antarctic literary production. John Cleves Symmes, proposed in 1820 an idea about the inside of our terrestrial globe, which includes concentric spheres and a hollow interior, which allows people to live on the inside. The inner world, illuminated by a different sun, could be accessed via both poles. His idea would inspire a long line of Science-Fiction authors dealing with Antarctica, such as Edgar Allan Poe, "Manuscript found in a bottle" (1833) and "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" (1838), Jules Verne, who would finish the story which Poe had left inconclusive in 1897, under the title "The sphinx of the ice fields".

In 1931 H.P. Lovecraft would revive the gloomy ideas presented in both books in his novel "At the mountains of madness". Antarctica was still being described as a fantastical place with a challenging mythological geography. In her studies Elizabeth Leane (2012) identified the main ideas, which would turn into a leitmotiv in literature for almost two hundred years. The poles are considered to be the portals towards the inside of a hollow earth. A great whirlpool drags the ships into the interior of the planet, as presented by Poe in both his works, "Manuscript found in a bottle" and "the Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym". An unnamed narrator, estranged from his family and country, sets sail as a passenger aboard a cargo ship from Batavia. Some days into the voyage, the ship is first becalmed then hit by a sand storm with hurricane force that capsizes the ship and sends everyone except the narrator and an old man overboard. Driven southward by this magical wind towards the South Pole, the narrator's ship eventually collides with a gigantic black galleon, and only the narrator manages to scramble aboard. Once the new ship arrives, the narrator finds outdated maps and useless navigational tools throughout the ship. Also, he finds it to be manned by elderly crewmen who are unable to see him. He steals writing materials from the captain's cabin to keep a journal (the "manuscript" of the title), which he resolves to cast into the sea. This ship too continues to be driven southward, and he notices the crew appears to show signs of hope at the prospect of their destruction as it reaches Antarctica. The ship enters a clearing in the ice where it is caught in a vast whirlpool and begins to sink into the sea. "Oh, horror upon horror! The ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheater, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny – the circles rapidly grow small – we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool – and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and shrieking of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering. Oh God! And – going down." (Poe, 1833) Only the message in the bottle will make it back to civilization, the author remains missing. Antarctica turns into a continent of dark secrets. Poe and his followers will repeat their warning messages. The White Continent should not be visited. This last frontier should not be conquered; the dangers lurking there should not be disturbed and awakened. Running alongside and sometimes entwining with the myth of the polar abyss is another set of legends, in which the geographic poles are not marked by absence

but by the presence of other phenomena, such as the large lodestone of medieval legend - the magnetic mountain sitting above a whirlpool in Renaissance maps, as first featured by Gerhard Mercator on his map "Septentrionalium Terrarum" in 1595. The lodestone with its mighty power attracts all kinds of metal objects, loosens the nails in the ship's hulls and disintegrates them. Jules Verne used this concept in "The Sphinx of the ice fields". Other geographical ideas, such as the notion of a warm polar region hidden by walls of ice drew support from some explorer's accounts and scientific reasoning. In 1823, James Weddell led a British sealing voyage into the far southern latitudes, meeting severe cold weather and seas littered with ice. Pushing south, however, he encountered changed conditions. Whales surrounded the ship, petrels covered the ocean and no ice at all could be seen. The ships reached 74°S in what is now the Weddell Sea, a record southern latitude that held for the next eighteen years. Weddell's experience gave credence to the idea of a temperate South Polar sea. The knowledge of the earth's flattening at the poles suggested to some that both the Antarctic and the Arctic might draw warmth from their closer proximity to the earth's core. An open sea at the South Pole appears frequently in nineteenth century and early twentieth-century Antarctic speculative fiction. As other regions of the planet were increasingly explored, this hybrid Antarctica – part fact and part mythology, ice-bound but temperate² continued to flourish as a setting for novels and short stories. Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne in "Manuscript found in a bottle" (1833), "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket" (1838) and "the Sphinx of the Ice Fields" were both inspired by his observations. At the same time, sea captains drew from the ideas and imagery of literature, when compiling their logbooks. James Weddell surprisingly included the fantastic observations made by one of his sailors in his account: "The sailor had gone to bed, and about four o'clock he heard a noise resembling human cries and as day-light, in these latitudes, never disappears at this season, he rose, and looked around, but on seeing no person, he returned to bed; presently he heard the noise again, and rose a second time, but still saw nothing. Conceiving, however, the possibility of a boat being upset, and that some of the crew might be clinging to some detached rocks, he walked along the beach a few steps, and heard the noise more distinctly but in a musical strain. On searching around, he saw an object lying on a rock, a dozen yards from the shore, at which he was somewhat frightened. The face and shoulders appeared of human form, and of a reddish color; over the shoulders hung long green hair; the tail resembled that of the seal, but the extremities of the arms he could not see distinctly. The creature continued to make a musical noise while he gazed about two minutes, and on perceiving him it disappeared in an instant." (Weddell, 1825) Another captain who inspired writers of their time were the adventurer Morrell, who published his experiences in "Narratives of Four Voyages to the South Sea, ... and Antarctic Ocean", (Morrell, 1832). His wife Abby Jane Wood did accompany him on board the Antarctic and in their fourth voyage (1829-31) Morrell was the first to disembark on Bouvet Island, then went to the South Shetland and South Sandwich Islands, where he neither found fresh wood nor would he encounter any wildlife and barely managed to survive. Penetrating the Weddell Sea, according to his account, they reached the latitude of 70°S and Morrell declared to have passed the South Polar Circle several times. But as the rest of details provided are quite fantastic – he describes cities in the ice, which he could make out in a distance and establishes his position several times quite mistakenly 124 miles inland [200 km]. Most readers didn't take his accounts seriously. This, however, didn't stop writers such as Poe and Verne to draw heavily from his experiences. Sea exploration was a popular literature genre at the time, but Poe was also influenced by Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" (1719) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), who himself had been influenced by Captain James Cook's voyages of discovery in the years 1768 to 1779. And as already mentioned, the chasms opening up in the sea at the end of the novel were inspired by the popular Hollow Earth theory of Poe's day. Pym's voyage covers similar geographical and psychic territory. The stowaway protagonist experiences a series of grim events – claustrophobic imprisonment, mutiny, an encounter with a ship full of corpses, cannibalism, shipwreck and a narrow escape from a treacherous Antarctic tribe – before running up against the limits of the world and his sanity. In the

last few pages his boat is pulled towards a terrifying cataract pouring into the earth from the heavens. Before it, its pathway is blocked by a giant white human figure. "The summit of the cataract was utterly lost in the dimness and the distance. Yet we were evidently approaching it with a hideous velocity. At intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and from out these rents, within which was a chaos of fitting and indistinct images, there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course... March 22nd. The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! As they retreated from our vision... And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow." (Poe, 1988) The novel remains inconclusive. A note of a so-called "editor" towards the end leaves room for speculation: "The loss of two or three final chapters (for there were but two or three) is the more deeply to be regretted, as it cannot be doubted they contained matter relative to the Pole itself, or at least to regions in its very near proximity; and as, too, the statements of the author in relation to these regions may shortly be verified or contradicted by means of the governmental expedition now preparing for the Southern Ocean." Poe and Coleridge turned the White Continent into a gothic locale, with their dark romantic novels. The region had set in train the ghastly experiences of Coleridge's "ancient mariner", produced the culminating horrors of Poe's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" and spawned the hideous amorphous aliens of H.P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936). The narrative centers on an Antarctic scientific expedition, which uncovers preserved alien life forms. These creatures are the "Old Ones" – "star headed beings" who originally came to earth in its very early history. These come back to life, when the scientists start to dissect them and slaughter some of the team. When journeying into nearby caves, the narrator and his companions are attacked by yet another life form, the "shoggoths", violent and shapeless beings. The gothic novel exploits US Antarctic explorer Richard Byrd's language describing a land "beyond the pole" and the many "lost race" fantasies set in the Antarctic to invent a scientific expedition that discovers the hideous true creators of the human race dormant under the ice. Ignorantly penetrating the polar abyss, the scientific team is ejected from the ice itself by a volcanic eruption. Lovecraft's shows humankind as hopelessly inferior and ignoring its origins. The narrator insists in warning us that "It is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth's dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone; lest sleeping abnormalities wake to resurgent life, and blasphemously surviving nightmares squirm and splash out of their black lairs to newer and wider conquests." (Lovecraft, 1931) The idea of disturbing dormant alien life forms in Antarctica is taken up again a few years later by John W. Campbell in his short story "Who Goes There" (1938). In the Science Fiction novella, a group of scientific researchers, isolated in Antarctica by the nearly ended winter, discover an alien spaceship buried in the ice, where it had crashed twenty million years before. They try to thaw the inside of the spacecraft with a thermite charge, but end up accidentally destroying it. However, they do recover the alien pilot from the ancient ice, which the researchers believe was searching for heat when it was frozen. Thawing revives the alien, a being that can assume the shape, memories, and personality, of any living thing it devours, while maintaining its original body mass for further reproduction. Unknown to them, the alien immediately kills and then imitates the crew's physicist, with some 90 pounds of its matter left over it tries to become a sled dog. The researchers try to figure out who may have been replaced by the alien (simply referred to as 'the Thing'), in order to destroy the imitations before they can escape and take over the world. The task is almost impossibly difficult when they realize that the Thing is also telepathic, able to read minds and project thoughts. The novella has been adapted four times as a motion picture: the first in 1951 as 'The Thing from Another World'; the second in 1972 as "Horror Express"; the third in 1982 as "The Thing" directed by John Carpenter; and most recently as a prequel to the Carpenter version,

also titled “The Thing”, released in 2011. “Even ignoring Poe’s considerable contribution to Antarctica’s literary heritage, the continent’s qualifications as a gothic setting are manifold. As a wilderness – and the most extensive and far-flung of wildernesses – it provides a site remote from civilization, on the edge of established social conventions, ...As a sublime landscape, it brings the rational mind up against its limits. As a literal underworld, it suggests the monstrous, the infernal, the Satanic. Polar mythological concern with fearful, dark spaces.” (Leane, 2012) Antarctica is a more than fitting scenario for horror films. The South Pole is simply put, more remote than the North Pole from the inhabited world. “The Western worldview in which the Arctic rests on the top of the planet and the Antarctic clings, spider-like, to its bottom brings an asymmetry to polar psychotopography” (Leane, 2012). This means, that the metaphorical southern journey is not simply a journey inwards but also downwards, a journey that penetrates the darkest, deepest regions of the unconscious. To Antarctica’s remoteness and its negative polarity can be added another factor central to its unique combination of spatial qualities – the ice itself. As land depressed under the weight of kilometers of ice, Antarctica is a continent of buried secrets. It is no coincidence that many far southern horror stories involve a journey not only to the ice but also under it, through fissures, crevasses and tunnels to subterranean caverns. There is something that lies there, something hostile and deeply threatening to human reason. Wainschenker (2013) relates this necessity to keep Antarctica isolated to the notion of timelessness. “Not only is Antarctica isolated from the rest of the world, but also from time itself. Time seems to freeze here”. Forever unchanging, Antarctica seems to be untouched by time, an idea, which is still present in modern day novels.

References:

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Pictures: Antarctica in Science Fiction





