Isolation Salvation: Top 10 Antarctic Must-Reads

Today, we find ourselves in strange and unprecedented times. With most of the world’s countries self-isolating or in lockdown due to the ongoing global romp of Coronavirus, taking on board tips from those for whom long periods of solitude have been an unavoidable part of life, becomes vital to us all.

There are many tools used by both early explorers and Antarctic scientists today to maintain their sanity during the long, dark polar winters and reading as well as writing diaries and poetry are always top of that list. And as the writings of internationally renowned explorer, Richard Evelyn Byrd, demonstrate, there was great beauty to be found in Antarctic isolation;

“I paused to listen to the silence. My breath, crystallized as it passed my cheeks, drifted on a breeze gentler than a whisper. The wind vane pointed toward the South Pole. Presently the wind cups ceased their gentle turning as the cold killed the breeze. My frozen breath hung like a cloud overhead. The day was dying, the night being born — but with great peace.”

To help transport you out of self-isolation and to the crisp expanse of the white continent, we asked IAATO field staff for their polar reading recommendations. Here’s what they came up with:

Forgotten Footprints: Lost Stories in the Discovery of Antarctica | John Harrison
Covering history, geography and personal truth, as well as being filled with stunning photography of the Peninsula, South Shetland Islands and Weddell Sea, this book delves into the minds of those most drawn to the discovery of Antarctica.

The Storied Ice: Exploration, Discovery, and Adventure in Antarctica’s Peninsula Region | Joan N Booth
A detailed account of mankind’s dramatic history from Magellan through the first years of the twenty-first century in the part of the Antarctic regions below South America and the Atlantic Ocean. This part of the world, by far the most visited portion of the south polar regions, is not only a place of staggering scenic beauty and amazing wildlife, but also a locale with a long and fascinating human history.

The Last Place on Earth | Roland Huntford
A dual-biography exploring every detail of the race to the South Pole between Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen beautifully capturing the ambitions of the era as well as two intensely interesting characters.
Captain Scott | Ranulph Fiennes
Written by an explorer who understands the hardship, endurance and deprivation that Antarctic exploration entails, this unique biography of Robert Falcon Scott offers insight into both the intense nature of Antarctic discovery, as well as how Scott’s reputation has been perceived.

The Last Viking: The Life of Roald Amundsen | Stephen R. Brown
Unravelling the life of the polar explorer whom claimed all four of the most notorious polar prizes; the Northwest Passage, the Northeast Passage, the South Pole and the North Pole; this biography gives thrilling insight into this legend of the Heroic Age of Exploration.

Shackleton A Life in Poetry | Jim Mayer
Sir Ernest Shackleton used poetry as both a tool to motivate and encourage throughout his polar career. This biography casts light on the poets who inspired him as well as poetic extracts from his own diaries.

Mrs. Chippy’s Last Expedition | Caroline Alexander
From the diary of Frank Worsley, Captain of Shackleton’s Endurance, this book catalogues the fateful expedition from the viewpoint of Mrs. Chippy, the ship’s cat. A wonderfully different viewpoint of this well-known expedition and well worth a read.

Toward Antarctica | Elizabeth Bradfield
A love letter to the white continent, poet-naturalist Elizabeth Bradfield’s fourth collection documents and queries her work as a guide on ships in Antarctica, offering an incisive insider’s vision that challenges traditional tropes of The Last Continent.

The Worst Journey in the World | Apsley Cherry-Garrard
This 1922 memoir by one of the youngest members of Scott’s expedition team provides a gripping account of the ill-fated Terra Nova expedition. Including details of scientific discovery, human resilience and diary excerpts, this book is renowned as being one of the most compelling of all polar exploration reads.

Terra Incognita | Sara Wheeler
Terra Incognita is a meditation on the landscape, myths and history of the driest, most inhospitable and remote parts of the globe, as well as an encounter with the international polar science community, based there.

How many have you read? Why not hop over to Facebook and let us know what your favorite polar reads are.

Happy Reading!