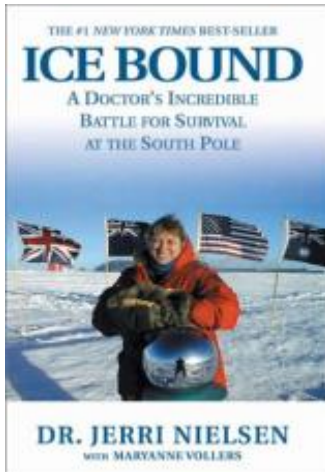


## Ice Bound

by Dr. Jerri Nielsen



### About the Book

*Antarctica was a place so hostile and alien to life, that life sang out, and every small breath was a triumph against nothingness. You were forced to re-create yourself again and again or risk being swallowed in the emptiness, and to do that you had to know what you were made of. The route to the Pole was, after all, an inner journey. Antarctica was a blank slate on which you could write your soul.*

When she spied an advertisement in a medical journal for employment in Antarctica, Dr. Jerri Nielsen recognized it as the "geographical cure" for which she had been looking. Seeking a change from the demanding pace of an emergency room physician and the politics of the profession, and learning to cope with a painful divorce and separation from her children, she accepted the only position not yet filled as doctor for the 1999 winter season at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. With a year's sabbatical at the edge of the world, she believed she could put her life "into perspective again."

Encouraged by her close-knit family, Dr. Nielsen embarked on what was to become a life-altering experience. In the harsh climate of the South Pole, where temperatures reach as low as 100 degrees below Fahrenheit, where complete darkness reigns for six months of the year, and where each day is a test of survival, she discovered a haven among a diverse and remarkable group of "Polies."

As the only doctor at the South Pole, she was solely responsible for the physical and mental well being of a team of scientists, construction workers, and support staff. In the station's sparsely equipped medical clinic, she treated everything from frostbite to crushed bones with often-outdated medical supplies and her own ingenuity. But what she never imagined was that her own life would be jeopardized by a medical crisis. Shortly after the station closed for the winter?with no way in or out for eight and a half months?Dr. Nielsen discovered a lump in her breast and found herself in the "unique situation of being the most sick and the only healer."

Aided by a support system both inside and outside the South Pole, Dr. Nielsen performed her own biopsy and later began chemotherapy treatments after a daring mid-winter air drop by the Air National Guard brought some

much-needed equipment and medicine. When she departed the South Pole several months later during a risky evacuation, she left behind the place she had come to think of as home—a place where "you find so quickly what makes life sweet."

In this remarkably vivid and detailed account, Dr. Nielsen describes life at the South Pole, where each day is a struggle for survival. She brings to life the rigid beauty of the region with its hundreds of shades of blue and white and its vast canvas of stars. She shares personal stories about the remarkable friends that she made. She unflinchingly recalls how she stared death in the face and triumphed. *Ice Bound* is Dr. Nielsen's extraordinary story of how she became one with the ice.

Many of us at Pole are searchers, many are travelers, and many have come, as I did, to destroy demons and to find answers. We also came to see how much we could count on ourselves and our abilities, alone. More often, we have found and conquered demons, thoughts, weaknesses, questioning of the self, that we did not before know existed. And in doing so, we have learned that those things that plagued us in the world were not important, or had gone to rest years ago.... The changes in my perspective, of the life that I have had and of the life that I aspire to, must be affected deeply by facing death, here, in this sensory deprivation tank. I will therefore never know what changes were from living at Pole and what changes came from my close look at mortality. I am only so grateful that I had the chance to wonder.

? Dr. Jerri Nielsen, August 31, 1999, in a letter to family and friends

## Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of *Ice Bound*, Dr. Nielsen states, "Since I have chosen to tell you about my journey to the South Pole, and the community of friends and strangers who rescued me, I need to tell you something about my life and why I made the choices that brought me there" (pg. 6). Does knowing some aspects of her personal life prior to her journey to the South Pole enhance the story? How so?
2. In your opinion, what is Dr. Nielsen's motivation for taking a position in what is probably one of the most remote places on Earth?
3. Dr. Nielsen has a close relationship with her mother, father, and two brothers. Describe how each one has influenced her life in general and how each one contributed to her survival at the South Pole.
4. When reading through the 35-year-old Navy Polar Manual, Dr. Nielsen finds a description of the types of people who typically apply for a polar expedition. Referring to herself, she says, "I wondered where I fit into the equation. Was I the escape artist or the adventurer? Maybe a bit of both, with some martyr thrown in for danger" (pgs. 77-78). Do you agree with Dr. Nielsen's assessment of herself?
5. Dr. Nielsen's estrangement with her children weighs heavily on her mind, particularly after she becomes ill. What is your opinion of the situation? Why do you think she chose to talk about something so painful in the book?
6. What were the greatest risks facing the winterover crew at the South Pole? Do you personally find any attraction to an

adventure such as this?

7. In a letter to her parents, Dr. Nielsen describes the South Pole as "awful and wonderful" (pg. 97). What is it that she finds wonderful about it? What does she find awful?

8. Isolated from the rest of the world, the Polies create a community for themselves. Dr. Nielsen states, "After months of living this way, a Polie might think she was still an American, but in fact, she was now part of a different community, a subset of America with different values" (pg. 169). What does she mean by this? Can you provide some examples?

9. In a letter to Dr. Nielsen, her parents write, "You have always been a survivor in all areas of your life and I am sure you are one of the strongest links in the little isolated chain of life down there in the underworld" (pg. 117). Do you think she is one of the strongest links? If so, why? Discuss her relationship with the others at the Pole, in particular her friendship with Big John Penney.

10. The people at the South Pole communicate with the rest of the world via email. Did reading Dr. Nielsen's correspondence with her family add something to the story that a straight narrative could not have done? How about her correspondence with Kathy Miller?

11. During a "winter poetry slam," Dr. Nielsen reads a poem called "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," the last four lines of which read: I balanced all, brought all to mind,/ The years to come seemed waste of breath,/ A waste of breath the years behind/ In balance with this life, this death. She then goes on to say that "it was only March and we didn't know each other well enough for me to explain my attraction to these last four lines" (pg. 143). What do you think her attraction is to this poem and to these lines in particular? How does she relate it to her being at the South Pole?

12. In her correspondence with Kathy Miller, Dr. Nielsen presses her for concrete facts so that she can assess her chances for survival. Why does she feel such a strong need to have all the facts, even ones that are partly based on conjecture?

13. How does Dr. Nielsen balance the line between being a doctor with a job to perform and being a cancer patient?

14. Dr. Nielsen's situation at the South Pole ignited a media frenzy. What is her reaction to this and why? Do you think it is justified? Do you recall hearing about Dr. Nielsen at the time? What were your thoughts about it?

## Author Bio

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