

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *100 facts: polar lands*, by Steve Parker (2008). Great Bardfield, UK: Miles Kelly Publishing. 48 pp. ISBN 978-1-84810-236-1. *365 penguins*, by Jean-Luc Fromental & Joëlle Jolivet (2006). New York: Harry N. Abrams. 42 pp. ISBN 978-0-8109-4460-2. *Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can build yourself*, by Carmella van Vleet (2008). White River Junction, VT: Nomad Press. 122 pp. ISBN 978-1-9346700-8-8. *Apun: the Arctic snow*, by Matthew Sturm (2009). Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 43 pp. ISBN 978-1-60223-069-9. *Matthew Henson: the quest for the North Pole*, by Kathleen Olmstead (2008). New York: Sterling Publishing. 124 pp. ISBN 978-1-4027-4441-9. *Polar bears in danger*, by Helen Orme (2008). Tunbridge Wells: Ticktock Entertainment. 24 pp. ISBN 978-1-84696-777-1. *Polar regions*, by Jim Pipe (2007). Tunbridge Wells: Ticktock Entertainment. 32 pp. ISBN 978-1-84696-502-9. *Race to the South Pole coloring book*, by Patricia J. Wynne & Ross MacPhee (2010). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 30 pp. ISBN 978-0-486-47668-1. *Rescue in Antarctica*, by Emily Sohn, illustrated by Steven Butler & Anne Timmons (2010). Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. 32 pp. ISBN 978-1-4296-3408-3. *The field guide to polar animals*, by Nancy Honovich, illustrated by Marc Dando & Ryan Hobson (2009). San Diego: Silver Dolphin Books: 36 pp. ISBN 978-1-60710-021-8. *Wham! Arctic*, by Sean Callery, illustrated by Shona Grant (2010). Edinburgh: Barrington Stoke. 23 pp. ISBN 978-1-84299-772-7. *What's a shrew to you?* by Mary Shields, illustrated by Jon van Zyle (2008). Fairbanks: Pyrola Publishing. 32 pp. ISBN 978-0-961-83487-6.

The polar regions have captured the world's attention, and children's book authors and publishers are no exception. These dozen titles are just a sample of the bucketload of polar-themed children's books that have been published during the last couple of years.

For the youngest age category, roughly three- to six-year-olds, *Wham! Arctic* teaches children about the Arctic food chain, from algae through to polar bears. *Race to the South Pole coloring book* offers children the opportunity to colour in scenes inspired by 18th–20th century explorers' adventures in the Antarctic; the detailed text under each picture makes this book suitable for older children as well. In *365 penguins*, children learn about mathematics through a zany tale about a family that receives a package

Correspondence

Helle V. Goldman, Norwegian Polar Institute, Fram Centre, NO-9296 Tromsø, Norway. E-mail: goldman@npolar.no



containing a penguin every day for a year from a mysterious sender. Although this book's subject is perhaps not quite polar, it is worth mentioning the gentle and beautifully illustrated rhyming picture book *What's a shrew to you?*, in which children meet the wildlife of Alaska's boreal forest. This book comes with a CD, upon which the text has been set to music by Susan Grace; for a while this was my five-year-old daughter's favourite bedtime CD.

For the next age category, say, seven- to ten-year-olds, there are several fact-filled books. *100 facts: polar lands*, *Polar regions* and *Polar bears in danger* are illustrated with (mostly) photographs. *Apun: the Arctic snow* uses (mostly) simple black and white line drawings to teach children about snow and ice formation. *100 facts: polar lands* includes some simple science projects, but this hands-on way of learning is most developed in *Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can build yourself*, a fact book with instructions for numerous science experiments and craft projects. Another fact book is *The field guide to polar animals*, written in the form of a scientist's journal penned in the 1920s: "Greetings! My name is Nora Jenkins, and I'm a naturalist who has just completed an expedition to the most extreme regions of the Earth . . ." (p. 39). This book includes pieces to be assembled into standing models of polar animals, which can then be arranged in a diorama removed from the back of the book (take a tip

from me: glue helps to keep the animals' parts together). Also for this age category is *Rescue in Antarctica*, in which polar facts are woven into a comic-book style adventure in which the hero is the super-cool Dr Isabel Soto, a historian and anthropologist.

For the older child there is *Matthew Henson: the quest for the North Pole*, a biography of the African-American explorer (1866–1955) who worked tirelessly to help Robert Peary reach his goal. Henson was later spurned by Peary, and only received the recognition he deserved for his accomplishments later in life. The significance of this chapter of US history extends far beyond the history of polar exploration.

As an editor, I cannot help spotting errors and there were, perhaps inevitably, several in this raft of books, including spelling mistakes like “katabtic” winds (*Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can do yourself*) and “nanataks” (*Polar regions*). There were also a few errors of omission, such as: “The Arctic is surrounded by land in Greenland, Canada, and Russia. Parts of these countries as well as parts of Alaska are in an area we call the Arctic Circle” (*Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can do yourself*, p. 4). Sitting here in my office hundreds of kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, I can personally attest to the fact that Norway is an Arctic nation. In *Matthew Henson: the quest for the North Pole* we read that “. . . Henson fired three shots into the air on December 22 to announce the return of the sun” (p. 96). If this is true, Henson’s shots were fired about two months prematurely: at Cape Sheridan—at about 82°N—the polar night ends late in February.

Children’s books should be edited as carefully as adult books. They should also include good-quality maps. The maps facing page 1 in *Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can do yourself* are downright confusing on account of their graphic style: it looks, for example, as if a large land mass is squatting on top of the Arctic Ocean. In the biography of Henson, the maps should have been placed earlier in the book to help the reader trace the progress of the Peary–Henson expeditions through Greenland and north-easternmost Canada.

I was somewhat amused to read in *Polar regions*, published in the UK, that “In 1911, Roald Amundsen (right) and Robert Falcon Scott raced each other to become the first explorers to reach the South Pole. The Amundsen–Scott research station is named after the two men” (p. 19). From a Norwegian perspective an interesting fact has been elided here, namely, which of these parties won the race to the pole. I would imagine that curious children would want to know this.

These mostly trifling flaws notwithstanding, there is a great deal in all of these books to engage children. In *Race to the South Pole coloring book*, the scenes to be coloured in

include wonderful details such as a Scott’s experimental snow goggles and a Nansen cooker (both drawn at a scale that shows the designs of these interesting objects), a close-up of a crabeater seal tooth, and even different kinds of sea ice, such as grease ice, bergy bits, open pack ice, close pack ice and so on—all labelled. Of each of the animals in the food chain it describes, *Wham! Arctic* poses (and answers) the kind of question my daughter might have asked on her own: “Could it kill me?” *Polar regions* explains that polar explorers don’t wash much, and that in the Antarctic “Mosses grow as much in a year as your fingernails do in a week!” (p. 20). This is how to bring science to children—no “dumbing down” required.

In the books that concern the Arctic, there is a notable sociocultural component alongside the “hard science”. For example, six pages in *100 facts: polar lands* show how indigenous far northern peoples have adapted to their extreme environments. *Apun: the Arctic snow* introduces children to the subtle distinctions that the Iñupiaq (and English) language makes for different kinds of snow and ice, yet the book avoids propagating the “great Eskimo vocabulary hoax” (Pullum 1991).

A motif that runs through many of these books is climate change and its impact on the Arctic and the Antarctic. For example, *Polar bears in danger* explains how polar bears, which depend on sea ice to hunt their main prey, are endangered by rising temperatures and diminishing ice. This theme is even present in the whacky mathematics-themed book *356 penguins*: it turns out that the penguins have been mailed by an ecologist uncle trying to save the birds from a melting Antarctica. In this connection, it may be noted that *Race to the South Pole coloring book* and *Amazing Arctic & Antarctic projects you can do yourself* include information in the front matter about the environmental impacts and “ecological footprints” of their production.

It is a pleasure to behold in these books—by no means a complete inventory of polar books for children to come out during the last two years—the variety of ways authors and publishers have endeavoured to engage children in natural science, social science and science history. The challenge is to stretch this creativity even further, to come up with fresh ways to spark, and reinforce, scientific curiosity in children. There are many indications that this is urgently needed in some countries, including Norway and the USA, where, by many measures, science “literacy” and interest in science among young people is waning.

Reference

- Pullum G.K. 1991. *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax and other irreverent essays on the study of language*. London: University of Chicago Press.