

Skating to Antarctica

Jenny Diski

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Jenny Diski just wants to be alone. And who can blame her? First her dad deserts her (several times, actually), then her mom, then her sanity. She gets her sanity back, grows up, marries, has a kid and ... her husband leaves her! So it only makes sense that, if she's alone, no one can leave her.

And Antarctica's the loneliest continent, right?

Diski, the author of seven novels, tries to wrangle a trip to the Southern Hemisphere by being a writer, only to be told scientists are the only ones who get a free ride. So she books herself on a cruise and packs up more emotional baggage than real luggage. Right before she leaves, her now-teenage daughter starts a search for some kind of paper trail leading to the maternal grandmother (they already know Diski's dad is dead — or left her for good, if you will). So along with the baggage of her childhood, which ranges from her mother being a stage mom for Diski's skating lessons to stays in mental hospitals, Diski heads south wondering what kind of certificate her daughter will find.

Diski, a Brit, is wonderful at travelogues. The scenery (especially the iceberg descriptions) and animals of south Georgia and other stops are described in breathtaking detail. But this is a memoir, so we get to go around on the emotional baggage carousel as well.

She tolerates her fellow cruisers, revels in her single cabin and then gets sick when they finally get to Antarctica proper. But she finds joy in that, too, and in her ability to not follow through on anything, a skill in itself, she reasons.

A map would have been helpful, as most of us aren't intimate with the icepack that is Antarctica. But her delightful writing made even me, with perennially cold feet, want to venture down below.

JODEE TAYLOR (July / August 1998)

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