

The Frigid Mistress: Life and Exploration in Antarctica

George A. Doumani

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#5441823 in Books Amer Literary Pr 1999-05Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.50 x 6.25 x 1.00l, #File Name: 1561674761274 pages | File size: 15.Mb

George A. Doumani : The Frigid Mistress: Life and Exploration in Antarctica before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Frigid Mistress: Life and Exploration in Antarctica:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Close-up of high adventure, hard science in the AntarcticBy A CustomerThose of us who have followed Admiral Byrd and other Antarctic explorers with admiration, will greatly enjoy scientist George Doumani's remarkable epic tales of polar research. They are told in the vivid setting of his day-to-day trials of survival in and on the desolate ice sheets and mountains of Antarctica. Much of the book is devoted to the extraordinary methods and means of performing simple tasks - how to stay clean and sanitary at 25 degrees below zero, the trials of awaiting snowbound resupply planes for days and days, and the business of sleeping, dressing, walking, cooking, and staying warm.George Doumani experienced five Antarctic research expeditions. Through unwavering determination in the midst of the icy chaos of Antarctic weather, Doumani emerged with a scientific triumph: a confirmation of the then uncertain theory of continental drift. Doumani describes hair-raising forays from wretchedly minimal life support systems (storm-torn tents and sledge-mounted shelters) during which he walked through crevasses and drove SnoCats into badly mapped uncharted terrain and treacherous research sites, then performed rock climbing feats in sub-sub zero temperatures and blinding blizzards. He collected a 350 million year old fossil assemblage-- the missing link in the chain that connected Antarctica with South America and Africa. The fossils were indeed of identical species and in identical rock layers in all three continents, confirming the continental drift theory.The book reminds one of the trials of Apollo 13, the nearly fatal trip to the moon, for when something went

wrong in Antarctica, the consequences were dramatic and life-threatening. Not only were physical dangers of fire and frost bite encountered, but also a full measure of psychological hazards. These were overcome with ever-increasing skill by Doumani and his colleagues. After months of isolation, they found their way back through storm and snow to the shelter of Byrd Station. There, while awaiting outward-bound transportation, the Doumani team encountered the stresses and strains of adjusting to newcomers, of further deprivation from technical and bureaucratic failures, and of competitive science almost as hard to bear as their stressful existence in the wastelands of Antarctica. The Frigid Mistress is interesting and useful for it vividly places the rigid requirements of geological exploration procedures into a real-world, survival setting. The logistics of Antarctic research - housing, transport, specimen collection with statistical controls, are a useful reminder of just how difficult field work in the geosciences is to do. In these circumstances, Doumani accomplished scientific results I consider to be equal to Darwin's discovery of marine deposits at the top of the Andean massifs. (Darwin concluded the Andean upland was once at sea level instead of at several thousand feet elevation - an astonishing concept at the time.) Doumani, using a very similar technique (which he reports in this book), was able to conclude, and to sustain the conclusion, that Antarctica was a part of the ancient original single continent of the earth, Gondwanaland. While doing this work, Doumani kept his extraordinary rationality, courage, and philosophical good sense through the harrowing physical and mental stresses of his research. . Though the frigid mistress that is Antarctica is always beckoning and beguiling, the courtship rituals are deadly, but the outcome is very rewarding yet taxing. It is interesting, scary, sad, humorous, informative -- worth the ticket for very chilling and captivating reading. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. True strange and stressful circumstances beyond belief. By Carl Lackey This is an account of isolated winter and several traverses, suffering from mechanical problems, crevasses, whiteouts, blizzards, lack of privacy, physical and emotional malaise, arguments (even fist fights), boredom--in short, the whole list of problems associated with living in an extreme, unusual isolated and confined environment. To his credit, Doumani is open about describing these difficulties. This is among the every few accounts I have seen that deal with the embarrassment and discomfort attendant upon having to defecate when one is living in a polar vehicle without a latrine, and that give the true feeling of traveling for weeks or months in a small, cramped vehicle with a group of other men, none of whom has washed or changed his clothes during the trip. By the same token we get glimpses of the excitement, joy, and even ecstacy of going where no man has ever gone before, of collecting truly unique scientific data and specimens, of climbing up rocks, sliding down glaciers, and generally feeling as if one were in a brand new, challenging and intriguing world. Doumani's book is especially impressive in touching upon many of the topics that figure large in the psychological literature on stressful environments. Such topics as the effects of age differences, the combination of isolation and lack of privacy, the relationship between educational level and the ability to counteract boredom without use of alcohol, the importance of food as a palliative, the swings from good fellowship to withdrawal or hostility, the role of communications with home, and the importance of patience and humor, are presented with great insight. In fact, I found it very reinforcing that a geologist would thus pinpoint the very concerns that psychologists doing research in such environments have identified as important. Most unusual of all, Doumani's final chapter deals with re-entry to home and family. This is a major issue, generally ignored in the psychological literature as well as in memoirs: The family, having reorganized itself according to new roles, structures, and procedures, must now reintegrate a long-absent member who expects everything to be just as it was when he left. Less exciting than the heroic narratives of famed explorers, this well-written book is more forthright than many, and can be more useful as a guide for future research. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A compelling view of another world on this planet. By Carl Lackey A few courageous souls over the last hundred years have risked life and limb to uncover the secrets of segment of our Planet that seems deigned by its origin to defy man's best efforts to learn its secrets. Shielded by distance, by terrain, and by a climate so inhospitable as to shock one's capacity to retain rational elements of understanding, an attempt to portray life in Antarctica puts the author under a heavy burden to convey meaning about life and living in an environment where zero temperature is considered quite moderate, and 25 degrees (and even 40 or 50) below zero to be tolerated and rather normal. As a gifted scientist, Dr. Doumani takes the reader on a journey of many twists and turns, as he describes life in various places in Antarctica, and at various times, all without burdening the reader to understand the minutiae of his scientific profession and the significance of his discoveries. He tells of men who have been isolated from all physical contact with their past lives and backgrounds for months on end, and how they act toward each other and feel about themselves. He includes himself in this panorama, and how he acts and reacts to his colleagues. He becomes both a narrator and at the same time a part of the landscape that is forever cold, white, frozen, and formidable. The author has been to Antarctica several times on various missions, but he never loses his love of the challenge and adventure of being there and unlocking its secrets. And the reader has an invisible, but very real, position--right there with the author--as he moves about in this fascinating, other world, called Antarctica.

Book by Doumani, George A.

From Kirkus SA latecomer in the recent spate of books on the history of Antarctic exploration and one that disproves

the adage Better late than never. Doumani has enjoyed a long and apparently distinguished career as a scientist working for several departments of the federal government. He is not, sadly, a writer, and his fragmentary account of fieldwork during the International Geophysical Year of 1958 reads more like a grandfatherly holiday letter than a book. Doumanis attention is resolutely fixed on unremarkable moments (In flight the passengers were ordered to change into cold weather gear, and the many layers of long thermal underwear, outer pants and parkas made it necessary to expand the seat belt considerably) and the quotidian details of eating (breakfast usually consisted of . . . fried eggs in several scrambled styles), sleeping (I managed to go to sleep for a few hours, and was up again to catch up on my letter reading), and bathing (Then came the greatest of Antarctic luxuriesthe hot shower!). Not that Doumani does not exult in his surroundings; he studs his text with exclamation marks to signify his excitement (There it is! What a sight! It was literally shocking! In my panic I forgot all about the rope! They simply dont give a damn! We had filet mignon!) at the thrills, dangers, and rewards of scientific discovery in a place that, he reminds us constantly, is cold all the time. That datum is about all there is to learn in these relentlessly dull pages. Readers interested in good writing to go along with their armchair travel are advised to turn to Douglas Mawsons Home of the Blizzard and Richard Byrds Alone. -- Copyright 1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.