

**Rachael Mead. *The Art of Breaking Ice*. Affirm Press: Melbourne, 2023. 320 pages. AUSS\$34.99 ISBN 9781922848529 Paperback**

Rachael Mead, whose poetry and debut novel have received critical acclaim, has expanded her repertoire with the release of her second novel. *The Art of Breaking Ice* is a historical fiction inspired by the intriguing story of how Melbourne-based artist Nelle (Nel/Nellie) Isabel Law sailed to Antarctica in 1961, making her the first Australian woman to set foot on the continent and the first female artist in the world to work there. This novel is a significant addition both to Australian Antarctic literature and Antarctic literature written by and about women.

I approached Mead's novel with anticipation. Like Mead, I first read about Nel Law in William L. Fox's *Terra Antarctica* (2005), and was prompted to explore further Law's life, her art, and her Antarctic journey. As an artist myself, and a researcher of Antarctic art, I was curious to see how Mead would portray Nel's artistic engagement with Antarctica.

The title refers to Nel's overcoming of social and historical barriers that confronted her, and also pays homage to Nel's own Antarctic journal that she had planned to publish. Under the working title *Breaking Ice* the original manuscript is held in the National Library of Australia. On reading this Mead sensed that Nel had held back on recording experiences or observations of a critical or personal nature. The silences and the gaps were a source of inspiration for Mead—here were the spaces in which she could craft a portrait of Nel Law. Mead weaves together fact and fiction, blurring the boundaries of real and imagined people and events, with descriptions of actual places and occasions providing a scaffold of believability.

Oscillations—between the real and the imaginary, presence and absence, and between omission and acknowledgement—are strategies that both artists and writers have used to envision and insert women within Antarctic history. Disrupting or overwriting narratives with creative invention has given women agency in histories within which their voices and their presence have often been unrecorded, overlooked, actively excluded, or erased. Prominent examples include Ursula K. Le Guin's palimpsest *Sur*, in which a group of South American women reach the South Pole before Amundsen then hide their achievement to spare the men's blushes. Agathe Simon's fantastically elaborate *Conti Project* charts the life, death, and memory of the entirely fictional yet published author Gabriela Conti, celebrated as the first Argentinian woman to reach the South Pole. *Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer* is Judit Hersko's performative installation in which she adopts the role of the daughter of Anna Schwartz, a fictitious Antarctic scientist whose work is grounded in an actual historic expedition and actual scientific research that has contemporary significance.

In a reverse tactic, Mead fictionalises a real woman. This shares similarities with *Chasing the Light*, Australian Antarctic arts fellow Jesse Blackadder's depiction of Ingrid Christensen, wife of a Norwegian whaler and one of the first recorded women to have stepped ashore in Antarctica in the 1930s. Both novelists draw attention to notable women in Antarctic history through fictionalisations of their characters and their stories. Significantly, Nel's strongest advocate and ally in Mead's story is an invented character. Pam Gressett is the instigator and champion of Nel's Antarctic voyage, and on her return, she enables Nel to stand tall.

There are conflicting accounts about how Nel came to be on board the ship. Some versions state she was an invited guest of the shipping company, others suggest she was smuggled on board by her husband Phillip Garth Law, the director of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) from 1949–1966, with retrospective permission from his seniors. There is no disputing that she travelled south at a time of fierce discrimination. With a few exceptions, such as the wives of early whalers and sealers, women had been prevented from participating in Antarctic expeditions, but change was on the horizon. As

Elizabeth Chipman observed in *Women on the Ice* (1986), the “womanless white continent” that had existed prior to the 1960s, and which many men wanted to preserve, would soon be “invaded” (87).

I detect the influence of Jennie Darlington’s biographical account *My Honeymoon in Antarctica* (1957) in Mead’s portrayal of what Nel might have encountered. Darlington and Edith “Jackie” Ronne, both American, were the first women to over-winter with their husbands and more than twenty men of the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition in 1947–48. Darlington recounts, “My job was to be as inconspicuous within the group as possible . . . I should ask no favors nor expect any, not even from my husband. . . . When the men forgot I was there, it was their highest accolade” (177–78). Mead portrays Nel as under similar scrutiny, but this is counterbalanced by the experience of being seen and valued as an equal and as an artist by one of the men, Harris McCallum. The theme of identities—hidden, emerging, and revealed—drives Mead’s narrative through juxtapositions of concealment and exposure, invisibility and surveillance, and anonymity and recognition.

For Nel, navigating the misogynistic cultural landscape, which her husband colludes in cultivating, is as precarious and treacherous as the Antarctic ice. That she was not provided with the appropriate footwear to walk on the ice and was told by her husband: “You’ll have to crawl” (171), is a metaphor for a culture of disablement and humiliation. The inequality, discrimination, and harassment that define many of the relationships in the story feel disturbingly contemporary. As recent reviews within the Australian and American Antarctic programs corroborate, these are issues women working in Antarctica continue to face (Russell; Nash; US National Science Foundation).

Equally contemporary topics are Mead’s references to artists’ presence in Antarctica. Pam exclaims “imagine what you’d produce if you were actually there—seeing it with your own eye, framing your own scenes” (13), suggesting that authenticity comes with in-person experience. Reflecting her knowledge of challenges that artists and writers face in the Antarctic research space, Mead alludes to a difference in the value attributed to science as compared to the arts (4,73). The first impression Cass, a scientist, has of Rory, an Antarctic arts fellow, is that “[s]he’d never met a poet, and wasn’t quite sure one belonged down here, getting in the way of the real work” (4).

A delightful detail is the titling of the chapters, each one the name of a paint pigment, evocative of the emotional, experiential, and geographical terrains that the story navigates, bringing to mind the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko. “Carbon Black” is the colour of Nel’s grief and a reference to her charcoal “sighing across the page” in an earlier chapter (172). Nel takes to the sky in “Cerulean Blue” and returns to land with the sight and smell of Macquarie Island in “Terre Verte.” In “Renaissance Gold” Nel emerges into a post-Antarctic life. “Phthalo Green” hints at the sublime, a trope of polar art:

[T]he terrifying phthalo green at the portholes when the ship rolled so wildly, she could see the void below. (110)

The omen of the albatross (59–65) and the Antarctic ice as a symbol of “chaste” purity (117) are other tropes of Antarctic art and literature that Mead weaves into the story. Handling these with a lightness of touch, or in a new and insightful way, Mead skilfully side-steps cliché whilst simultaneously acknowledging artistic precedents.

Bridging Mead’s poetry and fiction, the notion of a “spectrum of white” that first appears in her poem “Sestina Antarctica” (89) reappears in Nel’s description of the bay surrounding Mawson Station (138). Nel’s own paintings complement the blurred boundaries of Mead’s fact/fiction construct. Nel pushed her studies of ice and environment towards abstraction, with *Flight of the Albatross* and *Crevasse II* being good examples of this—both are held in the Australian Antarctic Division art collection. Mead’s depiction of the process of

painting these works breathes life into their making. Nel is an ideal conduit for Mead's own lived experience and memories of Antarctic ice and ocean. Mead's skill in distilling sensory observations into text enriches her depictions of a visual artist's perception of light, colour, form, and texture:

The heavy oyster-grey sky reached down to touch the sea where it thickened into icy rubble. . . . The motion of the waves was sluggish, almost elastic, as if the skin of the sea was slowly clotting with ice. (202–03)

The prologue and epilogue stitch together Nel's story with a contemporary timeline. Opening with the interment of her ashes alongside those of her husband within a cairn grave at Mawson Station in 2011, Nel is laid to rest without words of recognition. In a neat conclusion, Nel's invisibility is overturned. The story brings her to life with her work and place in history acknowledged.

The afterword is as compelling as the novel, giving insights into Mead's own life-changing Antarctic experience. Antarctica was the catalyst that ignited her writing career. As a poet, and now a novelist, Mead herself has become a notable figure in Antarctic cultural production—her works shape public understandings of the far south. Although her fictional portrait of Nel Law emphasises the fact that a biography and a collated record of Nel's Antarctic artwork are missing from the published histories of women and artists in Antarctica, Mead has introduced her name to a wider public, providing long-overdue recognition of a significant Antarctic woman.

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