



Big Dead Place: Inside the Strange & Menacing World of Antarctica

Nicholas Johnson, Eirik Sonneland - foreword

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When Johnson went to work for the US Antarctic Program (devoted to scientific research and education in support of the national interest in the Antarctic), he figured he'd find adventure, beauty, penguins, and lofty-minded scientists. Instead he found boredom, alcohol, and bureaucracy.

As a dishwasher and garbage man at McMurdo Station, Johnson quickly shed his illusions about Antarctica. Since he and his coworkers seldom ventured beyond the station's grim, functional buildings, they spent most of their time finding ways to entertain themselves, drinking beer, bowling, and making home movies. The dormlike atmosphere, complete with sexual hijinks and obscene costume parties, sometimes made life there feel like "a cheap knock-off of some original meaty experience".

What dangers there were existed mostly in the psychological realm; most people who were there through the winter developed the "Antarctica stare", an unnerving tendency to forget what they were saying midsentence and gaze dumbly at the station walls. And if the cold and isolation didn't drive one crazy, the petty hatreds and mindless red tape might. Though occasionally rambling and uneven, this memoir offers an insider's look at a place that few people know anything about and fewer still have ever seen.

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