

## **Ian McEwan recalls his expedition in the Arctic**

So, we have come to this ship in a frozen fjord to think about the ways we might communicate our concerns about climate change to a wider public; we will consider the solemn duties of art and the necessity of good science, and the responsibilities that flow from our stewardship of the planet, and how we must subordinate present needs to the welfare of unborn generations who will inherit the earth and thrive in it and love it - we hope - as we do. But first, we must remove our wet boots. Stepping out of minus 30 degrees, craving the warmth of the boat that is our home, we are obliged by our hosts to pause in a cramped and crowded space below the ship's wheel, and in near darkness, try to bend over in our thick Arctic clothing to loosen our laces with numbed fingers. Then we must stand on a drenched cold floor in our socks and hang up our "skidoo suits" - they resemble a toddler's splash suit - along with our helmets, keeping track of our gloves, and their liners, and our frosted goggles and frozen-mouthed balaclavas that gape at us from the floor in astonishment; we must do this against a flow of our fellows coming out of the boat, intent on putting all these items on, for it is our collective fate to be going in and out all day. Naturally, we do all this with good cheer.

The whole world's population is to our south. Up here we are our species' representatives, making in the wilderness a temporary society, a social microcosm in the Arctic vastness. We are the beneficiaries and victims of our nature (social primates, evolved through time like wind-sculpted rock), merry and venal, cooperative and selfish. In this pure air and sunlit beauty, we are in a state of near-constant euphoria. When did we ever hear such shouts of laughter at breakfast? We are all so immensely tolerable. We potter about in the day with our little art projects like contented infants in a nursery.

Because we are gloriously imperfect, expelled from Eden, longing to return, you find that on the second day, when you venture out into the boot room, in your socks, in a hurry because your companions are waiting outside by the belching skidoos, ready for yet another face-peeling punishment ride (oh God, seven more kilometres - when will it end?) across the cement-like floor of the fjord, that someone has taken your splash suit, or your helmet, boots, goggles, or all four.

This person has his own stuff, but he has ruthlessly, or mistakenly, taken yours. In a moment's extravagance of self-pity, you might think how all history's injustice is here - this is how some people end up with three goats and nine hens while others have none - the filching of a neighbour's land, water, chattels or cattle, and in reaction, war, revolutions, mayhem.

So, what are you going to do? Your impatient companions are stamping their feet on the ice. You might reflect that it is not evil that undoes the world, but small errors prompting tiny weaknesses - let's not call them dishonesty - gathering in rivulets, then cascades of consequences. In the golden age of yesterday, the boot room had finite resources, equally shared - those were the initial conditions, the paradise before the Fall we visitors are bound to re-enact. It could go something like this: the owner of size 43 boots left them last night in a forgotten corner. This morning he seizes another pair of 43s and puts them on. Half an hour later, their true owner comes out into the gloom of the boot room, cannot see his own boots, cannot see the 43s obscurely stowed, and empowered by a sense of victimhood, does exactly what you are doing now: reaching for the nearest 44s.

"Of Man's first disobedience," Milton blindly wrote, "and the fruit of that forbidden tree ..." - now you yourself are about to try that "mortal taste" that "brought death into the world and all our woe, with loss of Eden ..." Ten minutes later, the owner of those size 44 boots appears. He's a good man, a decent man, but he must now take what is not his own. With the eighth Commandment broken, the social contract is ruptured too. No one is behaving particularly badly, and certainly everybody is being, in the immediate circumstances, entirely rational, but by the third day, the boot room is a wasteland of broken dreams. Who could be wearing five splash suits when they weigh 20 pounds each? Who needs more than one helmet? And where are the grown-ups to advise us that our boot room needs a system? Hobbes would say we need a Common Power of which we might stand in awe. As things are, this is Chaos, just as Haydn conceived it, and tomorrow morning it will make us miserable. Meanwhile, as Arctic night gathers tightly around Tempelfjord, inside the toasty warmth of our Ark, elevated by the Vin de Pays, we discuss our plans to save a planet many times larger than our boot room.

We must not be too hard on ourselves. If we were banished to another galaxy tomorrow, we would soon be fatally homesick for our brothers and sisters and all their flaws: somewhat co-operative, somewhat selfish, and very funny. But we will not rescue the earth from our own depredations until we understand ourselves a little more, even if we accept that we can never really change our natures. All boot rooms need good systems so that flawed creatures can use them well. Good science will serve us well, but only good rules will save the boot room. Leave nothing to idealism or outrage, or even good art - we know in our hearts that the very best art is entirely and splendidly useless.

On our last morning, when all the packing has been done and the last reluctant skidoo has been started up, and as the pure northern air is rent by the howls and stink of our machines, our tirelessly tolerant hosts (as forgiving as God has not yet learned to be ) come down the gang plank and deposit on the ice a huge plastic sack with all the lost gear retrieved from every corner of the ship. A few of us gather around this treasure, and poke about in it, not ashamed or even faintly embarrassed, but innocently amazed. Here's our stuff! Where's it been hiding all this time? We barely know ourselves, and our collective nature is still a source of wonder - why else write fiction? We haven't stopped surprising ourselves yet, and the fate of all our boot rooms still hangs in the balance.

© Ian McEwan 2005