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My Last Continent by Midge Raymond

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Love at the Sixtieth Parallel: A Review of Midge Raymond's *My Last Continent*

My Last Continent by MIDGE RAYMOND
Scribner, 2016 \$26.00

Reviewed by JESSICA GEORGE

Midge Raymond's *My Last Continent* follows the peripatetic life of Deb Gardner, a researcher for the fictional Antarctic Penguins Project (APP). The novel's subplots converge around the sinking of the cruise ship *Australis* in the Gullett, a narrow channel in the Southern Ocean. Deb's research vessel, the *Cormorant*, is responsible for the preliminary search and rescue operation. Keller Sullivan, a fellow researcher and Deb's lover, is aboard the *Australis* when it wrecks. The search and rescue lasts several chapters and makes for an electrifying, if tragic, read.

In the chapters leading up to the shipwreck, the novel skips back and forth across decades as readers become acquainted with Deb's life prior to the disaster. This history includes her melancholic childhood, a research mentorship under one of the few female scientists at the University of Missouri, and her voluntary departure from a doctorate program in the Pacific Northwest. In each of these stories, we learn more about Deb's struggle for fulfilling scientific work and meaningful personal relationships. She finds both in Antarctica, where she meets Keller, a former lawyer beset by personal tragedy.

While the novel will appeal to many readers because of its majestic Antarctic setting, perhaps the most compelling part of *My Last Continent* is Raymond's careful examination of the life of the female field researcher. As Deb points out early on, "[tourists] will ask whether I'm married,

whether I have kids—questions I rarely hear asked of a male naturalist. But because I want to keep this gig, I will bite my tongue and smile" (6-7). Raymond plays with familiar character types, including the (usually male) wilderness survivalist and monomaniacal scientist. Deb both re-creates and challenges these representations. She initially comes across as aloof and condescending; for example, during their first meeting aboard a plane to McMurdo Station, Deb is surprised that Keller, employed as a maintenance worker, might be deeply interested in the Antarctic wilderness. Ultimately, however, Deb emerges as a complex and convincing protagonist who challenges stereotypes about gender and scientific labour. In addressing her female characters' reproductive decisions, Raymond also provides a thoughtful entry into recent debates about intergenerational climate ethics and the meaning of family and kinship in the age of climate change. These conversations come especially to bear in Deb's struggle to balance her love for Antarctica with her love for Keller, a person very much like herself: unapologetically independent and utterly committed to the cause of Antarctic conservation.

Interwoven with Deb and Keller's personal histories is a careful portrait of a melting Antarctica with special attention to the intricacies of its fragile ecosystem and the Sisyphean lengths researchers go to in order to protect it. In addition to Deb and Keller's moving romance and the novel's poignant descriptions of the illusory Antarctic landscape (where ice is often closer and thinner than it appears), readers will appreciate and learn from the novel's attention to scientific detail. In an early scene, Deb worries about the potentially ecologically-disruptive blood and vomit of a

passenger who has accidentally fallen near a penguin colony on Petermann Island. Tourism, readers learn, is the Faustian bargain of Antarctic research. It supplements the APP budget while further degrading the endangered Antarctic environment by exposing it to additional human foot traffic. In this context, the wreck of the *Australis* takes on allegorical significance, with Deb observing that it “was felled by what its crew knew existed but was unable to see, or chose not to see” (2).

My Last Continent is a welcome addition to the growing catalogue of climate change fiction. It is a bold and informative investigation about the meaning and labour of love at the end of the world.

JESSICA GEORGE is a PhD candidate in English at Indiana University-Bloomington. She studies 19th- and early 20th-century U.S. literature. She is also interested in climate change art and fiction.