

BOOKS

MEMOIR

Away from it all

By Chelsea Leu

Hemingway drew inspiration from the bullfights of Spain, Steinbeck from the sardine canneries of Monterey. Nell Stevens, looking for a place to write her novel, travels to the Falkland Islands, the collection of minuscule, frigid landmasses just north of Antarctica. Her resulting memoir, "Bleaker House," is a spare chronicle of a young writer coming to terms with isolation and her work's literary worth in one of the most desolate places on Earth.

Stevens believes that a writer's life is full of painful rigors, and so her destination must be grimly ascetic as well. At one point, she finds that the number of calories she can eat a day during her stay (limited by the capacity of the small plane

taking her to the islands) is exceeded by the number of words she needs to write. But more than physical discomfort, she's searching for a state of mind: "If I can break my habit of being distracted, maybe I'll also break my habit of writing novels that don't work," she writes. And the biggest hurdle, in her head, is whether she can withstand the loneliness she thinks is core to a writer's life.

Stevens arrives first in Stanley, the capital of the islands, where she applies an eye for telling detail and simple, flowing prose to the town's quirks. Internet access is spotty; the lettuce at the market arrives wilted. The islands' archivist keeps meticulous records of who marries whom, "in case anyone falls in love with the wrong person." Stevens traverses Bleaker Island, her final

**Bleaker House**

Chasing My Novel to the End of the World

By Nell Stevens

(Doubleday, 244 pages, \$25.95)

destination, mainly on foot, exploring the coastline's slimy caves and observing a fish-scented colony of gentoo penguins.



Mat Smith

Nell Stevens

As Stevens finally buckles down to write, the memoir moves from travelogue to a cerebral, almost obsessive meditation that begins to fold in on itself. We read snippets of her novel — about a man mysteriously called to the Falklands — and they refract the very experiences she relates in the memoir back to us.

She spends a chapter mulling over whether her novel adheres to her MFA teacher's writing tips, which the book itself quietly flouts. The effect is a dizzying recursion, reflecting the single-mindedness of a writer writing about writing. Then there's Stevens' incapacitating hunger and compulsive monitoring of her body and mood, which leads to gloomy introspection. "Haven't I made it a habit of leading myself to bleak places in the hope that it will be good for me?" she thinks. It all reads a bit like an account from someone in solitary, though her melancholy is undercut by the fact that she brought this upon herself. A potato, which she worships for its promise of sustenance, is a welcome source of humor.

Because most of the action is turbulent self-analysis, the book can feel airless and confined at times, locked in by the vast ocean surrounding the island and Stevens' own mind. But as Stevens wrestles with questions of how (and whether) to turn the grist of life's happenings into literary material, she paints an honest portrait of writerly neurosis.

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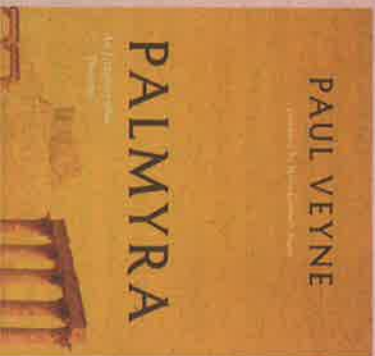
HISTORY

A legacy destroyed

By Peter Lewis

In a long view of Palmyra, Syria — the once-great trading waypoint between East and West — its recent vandalization by Islamic State fighters is the

worse than anything today's militants have dished out, which, in essence, was a sad sacking of ruins. Roman Emperor Aurelian conquered Palmyra in 273, and after meticulous looting, razed the place. Those were years that Delmar



that serious slice of historical ground. Why Palmyra? Because, writes Veyne, "it is located on the shortest path between the Mediterranean and the blue waters of the Euphrates," and "Palmyrenes were technicians of the desert." Diplomats, too, evidently; these were dangerous borderlands between empires.

A rare place, then: a merchant republic, a city-state even, where Greeks, Romans, Persians, Egyptians, Indians and others came to trade. Palmyra was foreign to that civilization only by dint of its past, its Arabic language, its society, its caravan activity, its religion, and many different customs.

A final tribute to Palmyra's sui generis brilliance: "Palmyra resembled no other city in the world."