

Going Straight to the Bottom -- And Loving It
By Elizabeth Marro



A Q&A with Jim Mastro, about Antarctica, a place he called home for a while

Jim is the author of “The Children of Hathor Trilogy” and “A Year at the Bottom of The World.” For more information, photos, a look inside his books and his adventurous, curious mind, go to his website: jimastro.com

What is the best way for a person to imagine being in Antarctica without actually going? Is there a “simulator” or are there experiences that would help someone imagine it?

Hmmm. Well, I'm sure there are times in the north polar region where it gets mighty cold in the winter. Even in North Dakota it can get down to -50F, or worse. But to experience the same thing as Antarctica, you need to have the bitter cold AND the feeling of being completely isolated from the rest of the world. Even in the north polar region, there are indigenous people who have lived there for thousands of years. Not so in Antarctica. I'm not sure there is anywhere else in the world you can get that feeling of isolation in a place largely untouched by humans, except in Antarctica. It really is, in many ways, like going to another planet.

What is worse, the cold or the dark?

Tough one! As someone who describes himself as a tropical fish, I am never fond of the cold. But the cold is what makes Antarctica what it is, so I never really minded it

there. Yes, it was annoying when you were trying to do something and your fingers kept going numb, but that was just part of the deal.

The constant dark was magic at first, but it got old real fast. I would say, for me, the dark was the hardest part. I was SO happy to see the sun return to McMurdo in September!

What kind of person will thrive in Antarctica?

A person who is adventurous, self-sufficient, self-motivated, comfortable with being alone, forgiving of other peoples' foibles, and intellectually curious. That's for winter. In the busy summer, that same person has to be comfortable with fast-paced work and high-density living. There is NO privacy in the summer. That was tough for me. I need time alone on occasion, and there was precious little to be had in the summer.

One of the things that struck me was the richness of life beneath the ice but also the absence of some of the more common life forms above it. Were vermin ever an issue? Did anyone even try to keep a pet?

Vermin were never a problem. The climate is just too harsh for anything to survive. I never had to worry about sticking my hand into a dark corner or under a cabinet to reach for something I'd dropped, because I knew there was no possibility a spider would be there. That being said, there was one instance where I think a pest did survive. There was an old building (Building 138, Thiel Earth Sciences Laboratory, now demolished) that was kept warm year round. During the winter, I would find little piles of frass in one corner of one room. (Frass is the word for the piles of wood detritus that termites leave). Since the building had been constructed of wood, I was certain a colony of termites had survived the trip to Antarctica and were doing fine in that building, though any attempt to swarm was doomed by the weather.

As for pets, on occasion people would find the odd insect or spider in their salad. Veggies were flown down fresh from New Zealand, and every once in a while a bug would tag along in the lettuce. When someone found one of these critters, people would gather around and marvel at it (much the way I marveled at seeing my first fly in over a year). It was funny because in the "real" world if you found a bug in your salad in a restaurant you'd be horrified and disgusted. You'd demand that the dish

be removed and replaced. You certainly wouldn't eat the salad! In Antarctica, finding a bug was one of the coolest things that could happen. And you certainly WOULD finish the salad! There was no way you'd waste those precious fresh veggies.

Some people did try to keep these salad bugs as pets, but they never lasted long.

What are ways in which your subsequent trips to the Antarctic were different from your first year. When you went again for another year, for example, how - Do you ever really get used to it? When you went the last time, did you know it was your last time? How did that make you feel? Have you in fact made your last trip to Antarctica?

The first year in McMurdo was absolute magic. Everything was new and different and amazing. It helped that I shared that first year with some amazing people, many of whom are still close friends. The second year was cool -- I had some great experiences, and I used the time to my benefit -- but the magic had faded a bit. In fact, the winter seemed to drag on forever, and I kept thinking I should be somewhere else. (On the other hand, I met my wife at the end of it, so I must have been in the right place!) When my wife and I started going every year for six months at a time, it just became a normal state of affairs. I had a job I loved, and we could travel the South Pacific at the end of each Antarctic season, and we were saving lots of money, so it was a great life all around. Antarctica had become my home, and I was very comfortable in it.

Leaving after several years in a row of calling Antarctica home was tough in many ways. It seemed like it was finally time to let go, but it was also sad. Still, even then, I didn't think it would be the last I'd see of Antarctica, and in fact several years later I was called upon to go again for a short stint. It was just like coming home. At this point, I don't know if I will ever go back. "Never say never," is a common refrain among Antarcticans. Whether I go back or whether I don't, I accept it either way. But Antarctica still calls to me. I will always miss it, as you would miss any place that is important to you. My time in Antarctica informs who I am. The place is a part of me that can never be separated.

Clearly you are an adventurous person. Do you consider yourself fearless as a person? A traveler? A writer? Why do you think it was easier for you to write about Antarctica when you were not there?

Fearless? Hardly! But yes, I do like adventure. What is the point of life except to experience as much of it as you can? I've always loved exploring, and being in Antarctica was like being in heaven from that perspective, because so much of it is still unexplored. I set foot where no human had before. I saw things no human had ever seen. That was fantastic. But I'm not fearless. That would be my wife. It was she who insisted on bungee jumping and paragliding. I never would have done those things if not for her fearless streak.

Why was it easier to write about Antarctica after I left? I honestly don't know. I've pondered that question at length and still don't have an answer. Maybe I just needed a little distance and perspective. It's a mystery.

I'd like to know more about re-entry. In your long bio, you write about the first few days back - delighting completely in everything from a housefly or a street cat to rolling in the grass in the sun but what about dealing with all new people and so many of them? What about dealing with everything from bills to taxes to every other aspect of "normal" life?

Dealing with people was easy, because it was so great to see new people! Every interaction was wonderful at first. It helped that I was in New Zealand, which isn't very crowded and has some of the nicest, most civil people in the world.

But, of course, after a while the magic wears off and we settle back in to normal day-to-day existence. Bills, of course, are never fun. I didn't mind paying them, but it was nice when I didn't have to while in Antarctica.

How has it changed since you were there? I was really surprised by how many people are there working and how busy it seemed. I wonder if it is more crowded now, or less? Are tourists an issue?

The crowding is the same, though recent budget issues are forcing the program to downsize a bit, so McMurdo may be a bit less crowded in the summer. Mainly what has changed is that there are more and more rules and regulations. Everything is more tightly controlled. I think I would find the current environment stifling.

This happens in any human endeavor. The longer an institution is in place, the more rules are developed to control it. That's one reason why European governments are such bureaucratic nightmares. The morass of red tape you have to wade through in

France or Italy is the stuff of legend. The Antarctic program has been around for almost 60 years, which is enough time for a bureaucracy to establish a firm foothold. There are rules for everything, and more rules all the time. Some of it is clearly for the good (such as for environmental awareness and protection), but some of it, in my opinion, is over done. Over fifteen years ago, a man who had been involved in the program for longer than me and was in an upper management position told me he thought Antarctica was over-regulated. And it's even more regulated now.

But there's no turning back the tide of bureaucracy!

As for tourists, huge numbers go every year, so there is certainly an impact. I think the industry does a pretty good job of regulating itself and protecting the environment (I actually went as a lecturer on one cruise ship a few years ago, so I saw this first-hand), but accidents are bound to happen, especially in a place where seas are uncharted or poorly charted and where weather and ice conditions are unpredictable. So far, two tourist ships have sunk, spilling oil. And, of course, no matter how careful people are about protecting the environment, over time large numbers of people will unavoidably affect both the physical environment (e.g., carelessly placed plastic bags swept away by the wind) and the wildlife (e.g., no matter how careful you are, thousands of people traipsing through a penguin rookery where, for untold millennia, there were none must, over time, affect the penguins in unpredictable ways).

Keeping in mind all the news we've had about the melting ice cap in Arctic, what has been happening in the Antarctic and how does this make you feel about the place now? What do you think is going to be its future?

One of the most enduring effects living in Antarctica has had on me has been to make me more environmentally aware. I have seen what a world looks like when it is devoid of life. You can accept it in Antarctica, because that's what Antarctica is. It would not be so nice if the whole world was like that. My time in isolation, deprived of things others take for granted, like trees and grass and songbirds, has made me understand that we CANNOT take them for granted. We humans have not been kind to the Earth. We treat it as though it is infinite and infinitely capable of absorbing our trash (physical, biological, chemical). It cannot go on forever, and, in fact, it seems to be approaching a breaking point.

It hurts me to see Antarctica disintegrating, but I feel even more badly for the world at large. Earth is (was, and could be) such a paradise for our form of life (especially compared to every other planet we know of!), but we are destroying the biosphere that supports us. And even though we know better, we seem to be doing it at a steadily increasing pace. Toxic chemicals, extractive industries ripping apart ancient forests, radioactivity, dead zones, plastic choking the oceans, pesticides, noise pollution, CO2 and global climate change -- the list goes on.

For the future, it is quite clear that the Antarctic ice cap will continue to disintegrate. I just laugh when I hear people say there's no proof the globe is warming. I've been to the place where ice has ruled for millions of years, and I have seen dramatic changes just in the span of a few years. It's melting, all right. In a hundred years, there will be no ice shelves, the West Antarctic Ice Sheet will probably be gone, and the East Antarctic Ice Sheet will be reduced in size. Sea level will be perhaps 200 feet higher, many many animals will be extinct, humans will be severely reduced in number, and human civilization will be in disarray.

That is, if we keep doing what we're doing. It's not too late to mitigate the problem, but I sure don't see any real effort being made to do so. Especially since so many people are willfully ignorant (even antagonistically dismissive) of what is happening right under their noses.

The Children of Hathor Trilogy

How did your life, your experiences, your interests shape Jason, Kevin, and Amelia, the characters at the heart of Talisman of Elam? Did you consciously give them traits that reflect some of your own or of others you know? I am thinking of course of Jason's absolute readiness to just go. He is thoughtful but also a person who, if it came to a choice, would choose the unknown to staying completely safe.

Well... It's undeniable that an author's characters spring from the author's life experience. I'm sure it's not conscious most of the time -- at least not with me. But yes, now that you mention it, there are aspects of Jason's character that reflect me. When I had a fantasy as a child of finding a flying saucer in the woods behind my house (from which this story is derived), I knew I would enter it. I wouldn't have thought twice. So that was me choosing the unknown over the "safe."

Jason's physical traits are based on my son, who has the same russet hair and brown eyes that I had as a kid. The other characters are not based on anyone in particular. Kevin's last name (Hayashi) is the last name of a girl I had a crush on in eighth grade. Amelia and Shalan are based on my preference for strong, capable women and my belief that gender and skin color are not valid parameters for either establishing or evaluating a person's character. They are (or should be) irrelevant.

Can you point to any aspects of the trilogy that were influenced at all by your Antarctic experiences? What are they? Was it conscious on your part or do you see it only now, looking back over the books?

Hmmm. There is one part in *The Hand of Osiris* where the three kids are taken to a very cold planet, and certainly my experiences in Antarctica helped me in describing that place and the effect of the cold. In fact, had it not been for Antarctica, I probably never would have even thought about having them land on a cold planet! But other than that I can't think of any specific areas where my Antarctic experience influenced the trilogy.

Is Antarctica the closest thing we on earth can experience to another planet? Or, would you say that it is essential Earth - Earth before our time?

Yes, I believe Antarctica is the closest we can come to experiencing another planet -- until (and if) we go to Mars. I wouldn't call it the Earth before our time, except in that it was devoid of humans until just over a hundred years ago. In that respect, yes, Antarctica is like the undiscovered country, the untouched, naive, biological paradise. But Earth before our time was also lush jungle and windswept grassland and hot desert and temperate forest, etc.

You've said that you chose to write a science fiction trilogy because you thought there was a glut of fantasy that is just now reaching a saturation point? Would you make that decision again? What is it about science fiction that offers young (or any) readers something different compared to the Harry Potter knock-offs? Do you just like sci-fi better? Why?

Yes, I would make the same decision now, even though science fiction is making a comeback (as I knew it would). I think I do like sci-fi better, and I think it's for the same reason I read so much of it as a kid. Fantasy is fun, but everyone knows it could NEVER happen. Science fiction is the literature of the possible. It COULD

happen. Sci-fi expands the realm of possibility, sparks the imagination, excites the mind. "Wow! Wouldn't it be awesome if we COULD fly to other planets? What would we find there?" It's no accident that a very large percentage of NASA personnel read science fiction when they were younger. It's no accident that many credit Star Trek with initially inspiring their vocation.

Will you continue to write fiction for young adults or are you going to try a novel for adults?

Both! My next project is a fantasy for kids, and I have a long list of novels I intend to write for the adult audience (including a thriller based in Antarctica).