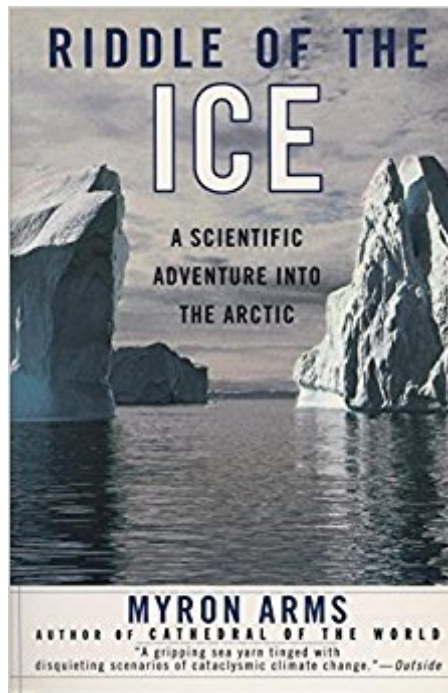




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Riddle Of The Ice: A Scientific Adventure Into The Arctic



Synopsis

By any account, the impenetrable barrier of sea ice that blocked the Brendan's Isle halfway up the Labrador Coast should not have been there in late July, in what was one of the hottest summers in memory a few hundred miles to the south. Frustrated and mystified at having to turn back so early in his 1991 northbound voyage, sailor Myron Arms became determined to explain the anomaly. Three years later, having pursued this obsession from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution to Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Arms took his fifty-foot sailboat and a small crew back up the coast to test his ideas--this time making it past the Arctic Circle. The days and nights at sea are an experience of both untold vastness and the closest of quarters, of calm seas one hour and pounding gales the next. And by the time the Brendan's Isle rides the great swells of Baffin Bay, north of everything but towering icebergs, the reader can be in no doubt that, together with the crew, he is holding a finger to the very pulse of our planet. Weaving together the unfolding narrative of the voyage itself with a groundbreaking synthesis of the latest theories about Arctic ice production--and the troubling signals it may now be sending us--Riddle of the Ice is a taut and suspenseful science mystery told as captain's log. This is narrative nonfiction of the highest calibre, and it is certain to become a classic in the genre. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The work of Myron Arms represents the best qualities of literary science writing; his intelligent, curious mind spins lyrical accounts of natural phenomena and the world around us. During a 1991

sailing expedition off the coast of Labrador, the author is blocked by a surprising and frustrating mass of ice--an unusual event occurring out of season and during a particularly warm summer. Riddle of the Ice is the result of that trip, and although the riddle is never really answered, we are treated to a fun--and informative--shaggy-dog inquiry that probes nautical science, weather patterns, and deep shifts in our environment. All of this is told in an engaging voice capable of turning an implacable mass of ice into a richly textured character at the center of a strange mystery. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Sailing the Labrador coast in July 1991, Arms, a U.S. Coast Guard-licensed ocean master and regular contributor to *Sail and Cruising World*, found his way blocked by ice, nearly 400 miles short of his destination. Yet a few hundred miles south, there was record-breaking heat. Why the ice barrier? Arms's search to find out led him to major climate-study centers where scientists are attempting to understand Arctic ice and its relationship to the changing global climate. In 1994, Arms took his 50-foot sailboat *Brendan's Isle*, with a small crew from Woods Hole, to Greenland, "to dramatize this investigation, to rescue it from the computer screens and library carrels." His engaging account of that voyage, in the form of a ship's log, encompasses nearly all of this book, and allows him to muse, sometimes quite technically, over the connection between sea ice, ocean currents and climate. We learn about the Great Ocean Conveyor Belt and the Great Salinity Anomaly, and that the route covered by the *Brendan's Isle*--Labrador Sea, Davis Strait, Baffin Bay--is believed to control global climate change. The sailing adventure will appeal to saltwater buffs, and readers interested in climate will find this a dynamic look at what's happening to the natural world, and why. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

It's probably not easy to get the average person interested in the science of large ice formations, so in this book author Myron Arms tries to sneak his lectures in. "Riddle of the Ice" is built around Arms' 1994 sailing voyage along the eastern coast of Canada and the western coast of Greenland. It is, he makes clear, an enchanting region featuring spectacular glaciers and huge icebergs, and just enough storms to keep a small sailing crew on edge. But the trip seems to be only a ploy to draw you in. What Arms ACTUALLY wants to talk about is the changing patterns of ice in the north Atlantic region, so he repeatedly interrupts the sailing narrative to talk about science. Arms means well - he wants us all to think more about the human role in global climate change - but you'd have to be REALLY interested in ice to stay with his long and winding discussions of such gripping

concepts as the "side channel export hypothesis," "Bond-Heinrich cycles," and the "Great Salinity Anomaly." He tries to present the topic as something of a murder mystery, but he comes to no resolution or solid conclusions other than the acknowledgment that it's a really complex subject. (Also, since I read this book 14 years after it was published, I couldn't help thinking that some of the science in the book has been superseded by later research.) I did enjoy Arms' description of the sailing trip, since I wasn't familiar with the geography of this area beforehand. And Arms' contentious relationship with a young crew member named Blue, who chides the author for not being environmentally pure enough, spices up the story. But the hybrid nature of the book falls short. If you're interested eastern Canada and Greenland, two very good books are the "The Last Gentleman Adventurer: Coming of Age in the Arctic" by Edward Beauclerk Maurice and "Two Against the Ice" by Ejnar Mikkelsen

This book attempts to combine the sailing experience genre and scientific research in one and unfortunately is somewhat lacking in both. By all appearances the author wanted to find a reason to do a sailing trip to the ice and basically just look around. Under the pretense of "research" they sail reasonably uneventfully up and back past the arctic circle. There is a lot of historical research presented, some of which is quite interesting but presented far too repetitiously. I could not count how many times the phrase "Great Conveyor Belt" was used. The author wanted to show how humans are negatively affecting the environment and the ice flows as evidence thereof. Unfortunately, from his representation of the actual scientists he quotes, it appears there is certainly no consensus about the long term greenhouse gas affects. The sailing experience as written did have some interesting moments and as one who likes these stories I could "get into" it. Nevertheless there are far better books such as "My Old Man and the Sea" for pure sailing journey enjoyment. Another factor which dulled the sailing story was the fact that they seemed to run under motor a good deal of the time. That is not what sailing is about. It certainly detracts from the adventure and risks associated with an open ocean voyage. In any event, the book has some merit for those truly sailing addicted types but might not work for most.

Like the setting, like the narrative, like the tone but with a small sigh for little character development, I like and respect altogether Myron Arm's balance when addressing complex natural events in Riddle of the Ice. Not a traditional saga of the sea but an intellectual thinking-out-loud wrestling match, his struggle is to understand. Riddle of the Ice bears his personal witness not so much to scenes of physical grandeur in Greenland and Labrador, as to "scenes" of professional

climatologists hard at work. Arms appreciates their sophistication and their sincerity, their methods and models, their numbers and equations, their opinions and openness, their current knowledge and yet awe at the rocky field of unknowns beyond. Arms is himself a question mark but a wise question mark, for his alliances are with individuals whose work is aimed at "getting it right." So, discard some editorial mistakes; put aside frustration at the lack of traditional adventures; never mind incomplete descriptions of the countryside and its peoples; don't read for political commentary; simply enjoy his gift. *Riddle of the Ice* powerfully quickens our interest to understand global climate changes underway, to approach change humbly with a tool kit that asserts we are self-conscious after all, the tool kit of science.

Arms makes a laudable attempt to combine two genres: travel narrative and popular science. He should have stuck with the science. He has a lot of interesting material about Arctic sea ice formation and global ocean circulation, which is reasonably well presented, though I would have liked a little more detail. Interspersed with this is his account of a sailboat voyage to Greenland and Labrador, which had the potential for some great adventures, or at least some interesting or amusing historical and cultural anecdotes. Unfortunately, far from approaching the level of Tristan Jones, Bruce Chatwin, or Tim Cahill, this part of the book resembles the diary of a passenger on a Caribbean cruise ship, only colder. Arms's stated purpose for making the voyage was to raise awareness of the environmental changes that may be occurring in the Arctic and their effects on global climate, but I can't see how his trip contributed at all -- he performed no scientific research (at least none was described), and there didn't appear to be any particular challenge or risk involved which might have drawn attention to him and his concerns. Arms does include an extensive bibliography. Readers interested in either Arctic travel or science would be well-advised to consult some of the sources Arms mentions and skip his book.

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