

"Equal parts courtroom drama  
and literary thriller...a unique  
and mesmerizing tale."

—KRISTINA McMORRIS,  
*New York Times* bestselling  
author of *Sold on a Monday*



# THE ARCTIC FURY

A NOVEL

GREER MACALLISTER

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Virginia frequently finds herself caught up in reflections on the past. Do you think her relationship to the past is healthy? How have you dealt with difficult memories?
2. What were your impressions of Virginia's defense attorneys? Do you think she should have testified?
3. Lady Franklin chooses Virginia to lead the expedition partly because of Virginia's experience leading groups of people. How does she demonstrate this leadership? Is it enough for the journey at hand?
4. What is the source of Ebba's regard for Virginia? Why does she decide to follow her after essentially being told to stay home?
5. Virginia wonders several times which group is luckier: the ones who came back or the ones who didn't. In her place, would you struggle to decide? Who do you think the lucky ones are?
6. Which of the varied crew did you find the most interesting? Who did you think presented the greatest danger to the mission as a whole?

7. How did you feel about Virginia and Caprice's early interactions? Did you agree with Virginia's decisions to let things slide, expecting Caprice to eventually fall in line? How would the story have changed if she pursued the conflicts sooner or more thoroughly?
8. What do you see as the final danger the expedition encountered? Which roadblock ensured that they would never, as a whole, come back safe and sound? Were there any missed opportunities that could have prevented disaster?
9. When the women's party divided, whose choice made the most sense to you? Who surprised you the most? Did you think any of them chose wrong?
10. In her musings, Virginia makes a distinction between serving as a guide in unsettled land and being a "true explorer." What challenges separate these two similar endeavors? Which would you rather do?
11. At the beginning of the story, would you have expected Caprice's actions in the crevasse? What changed for her?
12. Virginia thinks, "They would go home failures, yes. But they would go home." What do you think of this assessment? What does it mean to fail?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Early in the book, Virginia seems determined to rid herself of the past. As a historical fiction writer, I doubt you share that attitude. How do you consider your relationship to the past?

Well, I don't have a past nearly as traumatic as Virginia's, for one thing! But I suppose I have reinvented myself a few times over the course of my life so far, so we do have that in common. In the broader sense, I do rely on the resonance of past history with current conditions to give my readers one more way to think about modern society. How far have we come since the nineteenth century? Very far in some ways and not nearly as far as we'd like in others.

For such a formidable journey, the women's party seems initially scarce on adventurers. What motivated that distribution?

The exact makeup of the party was one of the hardest things to get right in the early going. What finally unlocked it for me was to make sure that each woman had a real-life counterpart, an inspiration from the mid-nineteenth century I could point to and draw from. And some of those women were doing startling things, like climbing mountains or saving soldiers' lives on a battlefield, but others were setting themselves apart in different ways, like drawing plants no one else had drawn before.

How much research do you do *before* you begin writing a book? If you

come up against a fact you don't know while writing, do you leave a placeholder or take a research break?

I definitely prefer to do as much research as possible before diving into the serious drafting of a book, but for various reasons, that didn't happen on this one. So I was still researching while I was writing, which I definitely don't recommend! But there was just so much to learn about the Arctic, what the women were up against, what the conditions would be in all these locations, that was the only way I could get it done. When I was writing *The Magician's Lie*, my first historical novel, I used to stop writing in order to find a fact; that book took me five years to finish. I don't do that anymore. Placeholders are the only way I can keep forward momentum.

**You develop a tense interplay between the courtroom scenes and the scenes of the expedition. Did you write both narratives simultaneously as they appear in the final book, or did you interweave them after they were both complete? How did that shape the story overall?**

That was easier than I thought it would be, actually! To reference *The Magician's Lie* again, which also unfolded in two timelines, I really struggled with fitting together all the puzzle pieces to form one cohesive narrative for the reader—Arden's story. But this time around, as I was writing both the murder trial timeline and the expedition timeline simultaneously, they just sort of fell into place. My somewhat outrageous decision to include one chapter from the point of view of each woman on the expedition actually helped dictate a lot of that structure—once I knew who died when, obviously her chapter had to come before that point, and I locked in the whole jigsaw before I was done writing the first draft. And it didn't change during revision, which is kind of remarkable.

**Which of the women from the expedition would you most want to meet in real life? What would you talk to her about?**

Oh, I've got a real soft spot for Caprice, insufferable as she can be. I'd let her tell all the stories she wanted to tell about climbing half the mountains in Europe. I don't think I'd even have to ask questions—she would just monologue freely until her tea went cold, then she'd ring for more and keep talking.

**Each time the expedition loses another member, you somehow introduce a new kind of sorrow. Which was the hardest to write? Was there anyone you were tempted to save?**

The hardest was Ann, because she's the only one who completely chooses her fate, and she does it for this noble, painful reason that no one else but her would choose. She was also the only one who I had to kill twice. I'd written a different death scene for her early on, but as I got deeper into the first draft, I realized it was way too similar to what I ended up writing for Caprice. I briefly thought about letting Ann off the hook, but I knew how I wanted the numbers to come out, so she still had to go. And it turned out to be, I think, one of the most moving scenes.

**Virginia traces the course of her fate squarely back to the newspaper article about her career as a trail guide. Do you believe there's always one fateful choice in life that can be treated as the source of everything afterwards? How does that shape your life?**

I do think we have turning points in our lives that we look back on and recognize as significant. The *what if* of it all. I don't think there's just one, and I think that you can make a thousand different choices at a thousand different points in your life and still turn out basically the same. But without question, there are forks in the road, and taking the left side of the fork means you'll never know what would have happened if you'd taken the right.

**The trial takes a hard turn when Virginia's past is revealed. How do**



you think we're all shaped by the ways we describe the past? Would Virginia's life be different, for example, if she stopped thinking of the Donner expedition as the Very Bad Thing from her past? Are those stories more important to us individually or to the people around us?

I think if Virginia hadn't been running away from that past she would never have made the choice to go to the Arctic, for better or worse. If she'd been honest with herself about how deeply it scarred her to see civilization fall apart in that way, she would have run farther away from adventure, not toward it. The real-life Virginia Reed, from the accounts I've read, settled down into a more traditional family life, got married, had children. Was she making peace with her past or avoiding it? I have no idea. But how our pasts affect how other people see us, yes. That's a big part of what I wanted to address. On the expedition, if Virginia's past had been common knowledge, I think her fellow adventurers definitely would have treated her differently. But by the time the survivors were there to support her during her trial, that revelation didn't change anything. They already knew everything they needed to know.

**What have you learned about writing, now that you're publishing your fourth novel? How has your process changed since *The Magician's Lie*? What has stayed the same?**

As I mentioned before, I've learned a lot about not letting the forward momentum of your writing grind to a halt in order to do your research! And it's funny, after *The Magician's Lie*, I told myself I'd stick to writing books told only in straightforward chronological order—so *Girl in Disguise* was that way, but the first half of *Woman 99* has all these in-depth flashbacks that form an earlier timeline, and then in this book, I'm just flinging timelines and POVs all over the place. Whatever serves the story, that's what I'm going to do.

**What's next on your to-read list? Anything that might hint at your next project?**

I'm always reading three or four different books at once, so some might be more relevant than others! I can say that I'm in the early stages of deciding what my next work of historical fiction will focus on, and I may have checked out a few library books on nineteenth-century New Orleans.