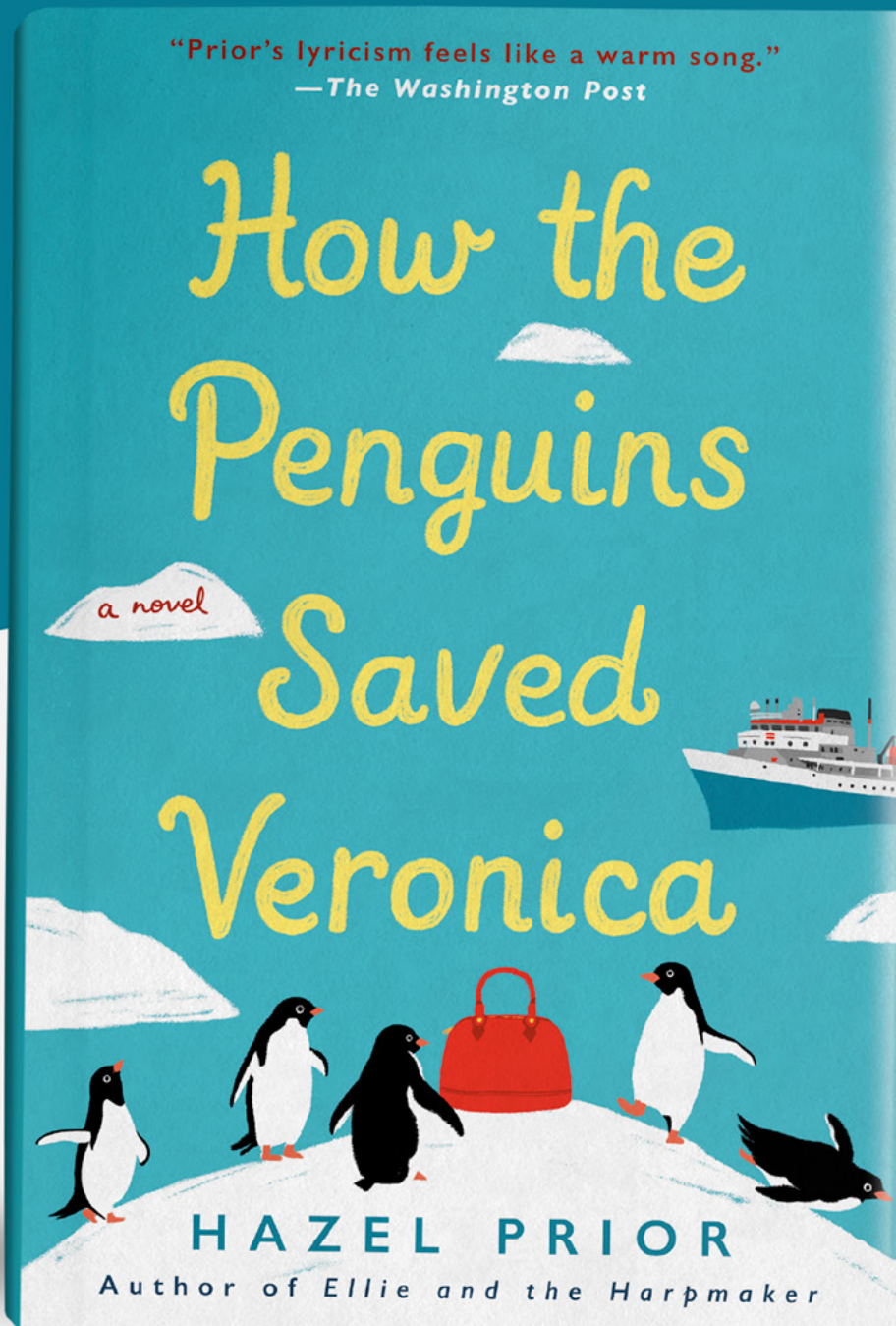


BOOK CLUB KIT





Dear Readers,

What an example penguins are to us all! These little guys experience the harshest conditions on the planet and yet they take on every challenge with courage, cheer and gusto. I have tried to capture something of their spirit in *How the Penguins Saved Veronica*. Whenever I feel low I turn to books, and I know that reading can often help us through difficult times. Perhaps that's why I felt compelled to write Veronica's story. This is a book about survival, about determination, about defying the odds. It is about hope. And it is about salvation—through penguins.

Researching *How the Penguins Saved Veronica* was a real delight. I spent happy hours reading books about penguins and watching penguins on YouTube, and I even got to meet some real life penguins—not in Antarctica but at Living Coasts, a sea life center in Torquay, on the south coast of England. I am full of admiration for these quirky birds. I'm also deeply concerned for their future, and for the future of this planet as a whole. Let us value it and care for it in every way we can.

Like the penguins, my heroine, Veronica McCreedy, is an unstoppable force. But, unlike them, she normally operates alone. Veronica is angry with the human race because of her tragic past. It takes three scientists and a huge, rowdy colony of penguins to teach her the importance of community, friendship and mutual support.

You may wonder why I chose to make the heroine of this story an octogenarian. In most novels the main characters are in their twenties, the implication being that later life is somehow less important. I wanted to challenge this. Older people are richer by far in experiences and have seen society change so much—surely that makes them more interesting? They are often up for adventures, too. I'm inspired by several people I know in their eighties and nineties who are learning new things, from harp playing to sky diving! Veronica, as an eighty-six-year-old, must overcome various physical failings, yet she is determined to contradict naysayers and follow her heart . . . even as far as Antarctica. This, I believe, is the stuff of true heroism.

I am so very grateful to you for choosing to read *How the Penguins Saved Veronica*. I hope you will enjoy every minute of it!

All best wishes,

HAZEL



A conversation with **HAZEL PRIOR**

Tell us about *How the Penguins Saved Veronica*. What inspired you to write this story?

This is the story of Veronica McCreedy, a feisty, grumpy and irrepressible eighty-six-year-old who decides she must travel to Antarctica on a mission to save penguins . . . but things don't quite turn out the way she expected.

I had three main inspirations for this book.

Firstly, the penguins! I have a friend who is crazy about penguins and travels round the world taking photos of them in the wild. She made me think about the appeal of these incredible birds. As well as being completely charming and comical, penguins highlight the environmental changes that threaten our world, which is something I feel very strongly about.

Secondly, I have recently met several elderly people who have bravely set out to learn new and challenging things in their eighties and nineties. I admire them so much! I wanted my heroine to be somebody who had been through a lot, but who was still learning.

Thirdly, I have become fascinated by wartime

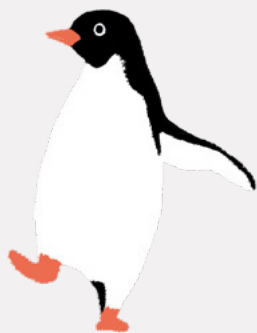
Britain, when everyday life and values were so different from today. I wanted to explore how a person might be affected long-term by tragic events, even (or especially) if those events are never spoken about. Veronica has been shaped by her past, which is slowly revealed throughout the book.

Your protagonist, Veronica McCreedy, is a senior citizen who takes a big journey all on her own—to Antarctica! Why does she choose to embark on this adventure?

Veronica has just read through her teenage journals, which remind her of her vital spark that has been ignored for so many years. The journals also lead her to the surprising discovery that she has a grandson. But she's terribly disappointed when she meets him. In a kneejerk reaction, she seeks an alternative recipient for her inheritance. Veronica has long been disillusioned with the human race, but she has a fondness for wildlife. She happens to watch a wildlife documentary about a colony of penguins in Antarctica and is enchanted with the



As well as being completely charming and comical, penguins highlight the environmental changes that threaten our world.



idea of saving them. And Veronica absolutely cannot resist a challenge of any kind—the bigger, the better!

Veronica has a stubborn exterior, but she has a soft spot for the people she loves and for the Adélie penguins. Why does she love penguins so much? What makes them special?

At first Veronica is simply charmed by the engaging looks and mannerisms of the Adélie penguins. But as she gets to witness their real lives, a deep respect for them is born. She recognizes a lot of herself in their determination and energy, their ability to carry on no matter how difficult life can be.

Have you ever traveled to Antarctica?

I've never traveled to Antarctica myself, but I know people who have, and I've spent a long time talking to them about their experiences and looking at photos. I have been to the Antarctic islands many times in my imagination, powerfully evoked by videos on the Internet. I invented the island (Locket Island) that is the setting of the story, but I have done my best to be true to the spirit of the South Shetlands.

What other research was required to write this novel?

I did a lot of research for the backstory, which was set in 1940s Britain. Veronica, at that stage a precocious fifteen-year-old, is evacuated to a school that is housed in a stately



home in Derbyshire. I was drawn to this period because my parents both went through the war, and I remember my mother telling me about her school's evacuation. She also described seeing the Italian prisoners of war out working in the fields, and being surprised at how much freedom they were allowed. As well as reading books about the period, I was fortunate to visit a local care home and speak to many people who are now in their nineties. They were kind enough to share many of their memories of life in those very different days.

How the Penguins Saved Veronica is your second novel. How did your writing process change, if at all?

Ellie and the Harpmaker, my debut novel, went through many incarnations because the process of getting a first book published takes so long. I wrote the novel fast but then rewrote it for a competition, rewrote again for my first agent, then again for my second agent . . . and that was before it even reached my official editors! It was a great learning process for me, though, and I began to realize what were my strengths and weaknesses as a writer. With *How the Penguins Saved Veronica* I didn't have the luxury of tweaking it forever, because of the deadlines. Luckily, I had the story and characters in my head from the beginning. There are so many elements in the novel it was a real struggle to get it all to cohere and flow as a narrative. This time round I have been utterly ruthless with cutting. And I have learned not to

be afraid of changing, changing back, changing again...

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

As with *Ellie and the Harpmaker*, I would love readers to feel entertained and uplifted by the story. I am also trying to suggest that we, as a society and as individuals, should try to be more understanding. We often make judgments about people before we have any idea what they have been through. Veronica and her grandson, Patrick, both leap to judgments about each other, and it is only when they are plunged into an emergency that they begin to see more deeply and clearly. Old age is usually something that is dreaded and loathed, but I'd like my book to highlight that it doesn't have to be like this. What I admire most about Veronica is her refusal to give up. Like the penguins, she beats the odds stacked against her. Not only does she prove herself to be a survivor, but new portals of opportunity are still opening up for her. The ultimate message of the book is one of hope—and that's something we all need.

10 Facts About ADÉLIE PENGUINS

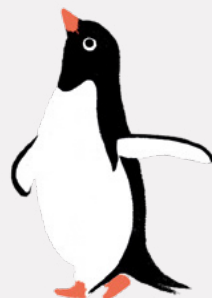
(*Pygoscelis adeliae*)



1. **The Adélie penguin is named after Adele Dumont d'Urville**, the wife of the nineteenth century French Antarctic explorer, Jules Dumont d'Urville.
2. **Adélies breed in huge colonies called "rookeries," up to half a million birds living together.** These are raucous, busy and smelly affairs, awash with pink penguin poop.
3. Adélie penguins are members of the brush-tailed group of penguins, so-called for their long tail feathers. Adélies are about 70 centimeters tall. **They sport a "tuxedo" look, with a black head and back, white chest and belly, and white rings around their brown eyes.** Their bill is black with an orange/pink base. They have pink legs and feet.
4. On land, Adélies waddle or toboggan on their bellies across the snow. In the water, they are excellent swimmers. **They can dive as deep as 180 meters and hold their breath for up to six minutes.**
5. **Adélies eat krill, other crustaceans and several species of fish, such as lantern fish, Antarctic silverfish and squid.**



6. **Adélie** can live up to 20 years in the wild. They spend October through February (the Antarctic summer) breeding in rocky, coastal areas. When the sea freezes in the winter, they travel northward to forage in areas of open water in the pack ice.
7. Male Adélie are nest builders, and they aim to attract a female by building the biggest and best nest. **Nests are built from pebbles.** Cheeky Adélie will often steal pebbles from their neighbors.
8. Females lay two eggs. **Both parents take turns incubating them and babysitting once the fluffy little chicks have hatched.** Chicks are fed regurgitated krill. After 3 to 4 weeks, the chicks gather in small groups called crèches. Then at 7 to 9 weeks old, they will leave the colony to go to sea.
9. **Adélie communicate by voice and body gestures to woo each other,** recognize their mate after an absence (they are generally faithful for many years) and locate their own chick in the crowd.
10. Some Adélie populations are increasing but those in the Antarctic Peninsula are in decline. **Climate change is one of the main threats to the penguins.** The other is from commercial fisheries that deplete the sea of krill, their main source of food. Adélie penguins are currently classified as “near threatened.”





PATRICK'S LEMON POLENTA CAKE

For the cake

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons
($1\frac{3}{4}$ sticks) unsalted butter

1 cup superfine sugar

2 cups almond meal or flour

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup fine polenta or cornmeal

$1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder

3 extra-large eggs

Zest of 2 lemons

For the syrup

Juice of 2 lemons

1 heaping cup
confectioners' sugar

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/160°C Fan/gas mark 4. Grease the base of a 23cm/9inch springform cake pan and line with parchment paper.
2. Beat the butter and sugar together until pale and fluffy.
3. Mix together the almond meal, polenta and baking powder. Beat some of this into the butter-sugar mixture, followed by 1 egg, then alternate dry ingredients and eggs while beating the mixture.
4. Beat in the lemon zest. Spoon the mixture into your prepared pan and bake in the oven for about 40 minutes.
5. When the edges of the cake have begun to shrink away from the sides of the pan, remove it from the oven. Place it on a cooling rack in its pan.
6. Next, make the syrup by boiling together the lemon juice and sugar in a small saucepan.
7. Prick the top of the cake all over with a cake tester, pour the warm syrup over it and leave it to cool before taking it out of the pan.



Discussion Questions

1. The story is told from the viewpoint of an old lady and a young man. What issues does Veronica have with Patrick when she first meets him? What issues does Patrick have with Veronica? Are they right in their assumptions? Do you think their judgments are typical of the way the older and younger generations view each other?
2. There are many types of caring in the story. What are they, and which do you think is most important?
3. *Veronica McCreedy does not cry.* How has this suppression of feelings affected Veronica's life? Is it ever good to hide how you feel?
4. The diary sections set in wartime Britain highlight a different lifestyle and values from those we have in the twenty-first century. Which aspects are better and which are worse now?
5. In what ways is Veronica manipulative? In what ways does she also expect others to be manipulative? Is this a forgivable trait?
6. You learn more about the characters' backgrounds as you read further into the novel. Did your opinion of any of them change? If so, how?
7. Have you ever found it easier to talk to an animal/bird than to a human? What is the role of Pip the Penguin in the novel?
8. Which character do you most admire? Why?
9. Terry says: "Human intervention has harmed wildlife beyond belief." Is she right? What can we do to remedy the situation?
10. What do you think Veronica learned from the penguins?



About
HAZEL PRIOR



Hazel Prior has had short stories published in literary magazines and has won numerous writing competitions in the UK. She is a harpist who lives in Exmoor, England. *Ellie and the Harpmaker* is her first novel, and *How the Penguins Saved Veronica* is her second.