

Reading Group Gold

South Pole Station

Ashley Shelby

ABOUT THE BOOK

DO YOU HAVE DIGESTION PROBLEMS DUE TO STRESS? DO YOU HAVE PROBLEMS WITH AUTHORITY? HOW MANY ALCOHOLIC DRINKS DO YOU CONSUME A WEEK? WOULD YOU RATHER BE A FLORIST OR A TRUCK DRIVER?

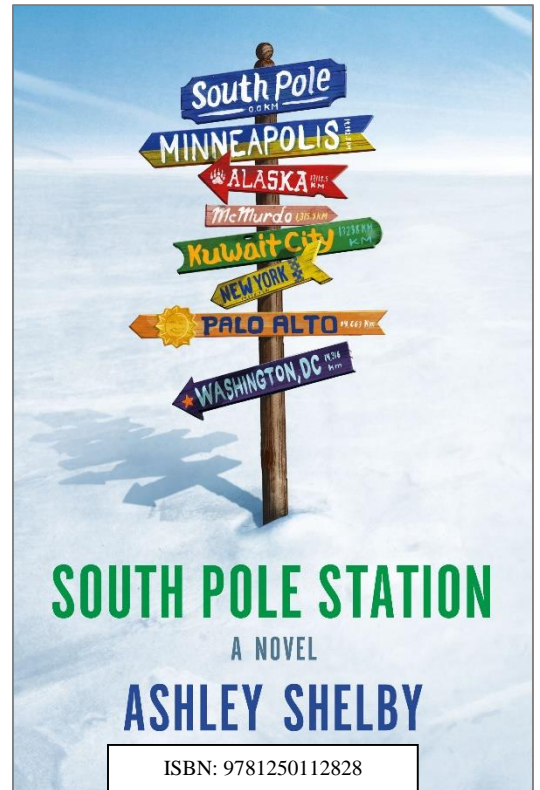
These are some of the questions that determine if you have what it takes to survive at *South Pole Station*, a place with an average temperature of -54°F and no sunlight for six months a year. Cooper Gosling has just answered five hundred of them. Her results indicate she is abnormal enough for Polar life.

Cooper's not sure if this is an achievement, but she knows she has nothing to lose. Unmoored by a recent family tragedy, she's adrift at thirty and—despite her early promise as a painter—on the verge of sinking her career. So she accepts her place in the National Science Foundation's Artists & Writers Program and flees to Antarctica, where she encounters a group of misfits motivated by desires as ambiguous as her own. The only thing the Polies have in common is the conviction that they don't belong anywhere else. Then a fringe scientist arrives, claiming climate change is a hoax. His presence will rattle this already-imbalanced community, bringing Cooper and the Polies to the center of a global controversy and threatening the ancient ice chip they call home.

A warmhearted comedy of errors set in the world's harshest place, Ashley Shelby's *South Pole Station* is a wry and witty debut novel about the courage it takes to band together when everything around you falls apart.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In her interview, Tucker prods Cooper for her motivation for going to the South Pole. She's hesitant to say she desires "to be somewhere else" because that sounds like she's "running from something." But Tucker responds that it's not "running from something . . . It's turning aside . . . Looking askance." Do you agree with Tucker's assessment? Does this hold true for Cooper? For the other Polies?
2. Many of the Polies take issue with calling Pavano a "climate skeptic" because, as Sal says, "All scientists are born skeptics. Pavano is not a practicing scientist." Do you agree with Sal? Why or why not?



3. Though it's eventually disproved, Sal poses a compelling theory about the origins of the universe, a "cyclic model" in which "every trillion or so years, the universe remakes itself as an echo of its previous form . . . Every corner of space makes galaxies, stars, planets, and presumably life, over and over again." This model, he says, "has an explanation for 'what happened before the Big Bang.'" He proposes, "Instead of a single 'bang,' it was engaged in an endless cycle with endless variations." Cooper, however, poses the question of how this cycle begins, of what happens "before." What do you think of Sal's theory? In what ways do you find it believable? How might you contest it?
4. Cooper spends much time trying to come to grips with David's suicide. How do you see her working through his death throughout the novel? In what ways do you think she makes peace with his choice?
5. What do you think of Pearl's ambitions in the kitchen? Did you root for her? Think she was manipulative? Both?
6. *South Pole Station* unfolds through various narrative perspectives—Cooper, Pearl, Tucker, Bozer, Pavano, even emails, and official government documents. How does having these multiple vantage points shape your sense of the community? In what ways would the story be different if we were only privy to Cooper's perspective?
7. Congressman Bayless gives a speech in which he purports, "Dissent is the healthiest state of affairs in any democracy . . . democracy is under attack. That in a bastion of free thought, the covenant of free thought has been broken . . . Dr. Pavano has been the victim of a systematic and sustained pattern of harassment based solely on his research." Sal's rebuttal is that "in the scientific community, there's virtually unanimous consensus that the earth is warming . . . instead of fearing this new knowledge . . . accept it, and leave science to science." How would you respond to both of these statements?
8. As an artist, Cooper's role at the station is more nebulous than that of some of the other characters. Right before the standoff, Denise tells Cooper that her "paintings will remind the people here that they are not just cogs of the machine." How do you interpret Denise's statement?
9. What did you think of Cooper's reaction to her injury? How might you have reacted in her position?
10. Climate change is the subject of much debate in our society; it's a complicated issue. What did you take away from *South Pole Station* about the interplay of science, politics, religion, and economics in the climate change debate? Did the novel shift your perspective at all? How so?

11. We aren't privy to Pavano's perspective until the end of the novel when we learn of his ascendance as a "climate change skeptic." In what ways did his backstory align with your expectations? What elements surprised you?

Guide written by Laura Chasen

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