

# The BiblioFiles: Victoria McKernan

**Premiere date: April 28, 2012**

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Victoria McKernan, author of Shackleton's Stowaway. In 1914, British explorer Ernest Shackleton and his crew of 27 men set off on a tremendously ambitious expedition. Their goal was to be the first men to cross the Antarctic continent. Unfortunately, their ship, the Endurance, never reached land. Instead, it became trapped by pack ice in the Weddell Sea.

The ship was eventually crushed by the ice, forcing the men to travel by lifeboat and land on the barren and inhospitable Elephant Island. Since the island was too remote for passing ships, there was no hope of rescue. So Shackleton and five others returned to sea in a tiny boat and sailed 800 miles to South Georgia Island. There, they hoped to contact a whaling station and return for the others. When hurricane strength winds forced them to land on the wrong side of South Georgia Island, Shackleton and two others trekked 25 miles over mountains-- 36 hours without stopping-- to reach civilization. Eventually, Shackleton rescued the three men on South Georgia Island and the 22 men stranded on Elephant Island. Despite incredible odds and unimaginable hardships, not a single man was lost.

The story of Ernest Shackleton is absolutely true, and author Victoria McKernan brings it to life through the eyes of Perce Blackborow, a young sailor who actually stowed away on the Endurance in 1914. McKernan enhances the historical story with fiction and imagination to create an amazing and fast-paced tale, skillfully breathing life into the characters and settings. You feel you are right there with the men as they set sail, abandon ship, barely survive the journey in the lifeboats, and then wait in agony and hope to be rescued. Once finished, you feel as if you have adventured at the edge of the world and lived to tell the tale. Victoria McKernan joins us from Washington, DC. Ms. McKernan, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Thank you, it's fun to be here.

DR. DANA: When did you first learn about the Shackleton expedition?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: I think I had heard about it way long ago at one point, but then I was doing research-- I wrote adult thriller novels, as well, and I was going to write one of those set in Antarctica. So I just started reading for some background, came across the story, was just immediately captured.

DR. DANA: Did you approach this book as a storyteller or as a historian?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Good question. A little of both. All my other books have some historical elements and I love doing the research. I love the history, and I can get stuck in it. So I like being able to bring in everything, but then ultimately, you have to look at it as a storyteller and take out 75% of the history. It's like Moby Dick is not a story of the history of whaling. It's a story of people on an adventure. And that's what I'm telling here, a story of people on an adventure that happens to be true.

DR. DANA: And it's a very big adventure. What was the most awe-inspiring about Shackleton's story that really captured you?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: The big deal thing of a sail from Elephant Island to South Georgia was certainly the most grueling, enormous, taxing, impossible to believe journey. But for me, just the daily organization-- the fact that he kept all these men together for such a long time under such grueling conditions-- that really impressed me the most and awed me the most. If you've ever had kids inside with the power off for a couple of days in the winter, you know what that's like.

So here's 28 people freezing, eating nothing but penguins, living in tents, and he's keeping spirits up and keeping things running smoothly.

DR. DANA: You weave together fact and fiction really well in this book, and the voices and conversations bring the characters to life. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read a passage that illustrates this blend.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: I'd be happy to.

DR. DANA: And I'll introduce the passage by saying that the ship that they're on, the Endurance, was trapped and eventually crushed by pack ice. They had to abandon ship. Once Shackleton determined that it was impossible to reach land on it, the men set up camp on an ice flow. The plan was to wait until the ice broke up, then run for the lifeboats and try to reach land. At this point in the story, they are returning to the crushed ship to salvage what they can.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: "They called their new home Ocean Camp. It was a good, thick chunk of ice, almost a mile square. Best of all, it was only two miles from the remains of the Endurance, where so much had been left behind. That first afternoon, most of the men went back to see what they could salvage. Everyone was in a jolly mood as they set out, but when they got close to the wreck, they fell silent. The Endurance was little more than a twisted pile of wood, half sunk and crushed like a child's toy run over by a train. It was a horrible sight.

'Doesn't it seem a hundred years ago,' Perce said. 'And it's only been a week since we left her.'

'Father Neptune got us, boys' Billy said with some admiration. 'Poured out all his vengeance for trespassing in his domains.'

McNeish, Hurley, and Crean went on board first to check for danger. The mainmast was about to fall, so they cut it down. The mizzen fell with it and made a terrible sound. The sorrow didn't last

long, however, once the plunder began. The next few days became a combination pirate raid, treasure hunt, and Christmas all rolled into one. They brought back planks of wood and built floors for the tents. They pried up the entire wheelhouse and turned it into a galley for Charlie. Much to Billy's delight, many of the encyclopedias were rescued. They salvaged boards and ropes and rolls of canvas. They spent hours prying out every precious nail they could get. Hurley found a metal coal hod and more pieces of the ash chute and improved the blubber stove.

'Look at that,' he said proudly. 'We can melt two and a half gallons of water in thirty minutes with ten pounds of blubber for fuel. That's double what we were doing.'

Best of all, they recovered the third lifeboat. No one had liked the idea of all twenty-eight men crammed into two lifeboats. Now all they needed was for the ice to break up enough to use them. Meanwhile, they worked on a more comfortable wait.

'Do you know that big iron pot we had?' Charlie asked Perce one day. 'It was in the pantry locker.'

'Aye.'

'Could you have a look for it? Be a great thing to 'ave! All's we got is this thin one now, and I don't think it will last. Hurley's new stove gets too hot, y'see.'

The wreckage shifted day by day, so when they found the pantry locker, the door was under two feet of water and eight inches of slushy ice.

'Anyone fancy a swim?' Perce said. No one was exactly jumping for the opportunity.

'Would be mighty good to have that big pot,' Billy said wistfully. 'I'll bet if we sent a big strong fellow down with a rope around him, he could find it well enough.' He looked pointedly at Tom Crean.

'I say we're better of sending a skinny little fellow down.' Crean grinned. 'And have the big strong fellow hold his ankles.'

'Well, there's an idea!' Billy replied quickly. 'Not a good idea, but an idea. What do you say, Perce?'

'I say it's fine of you to volunteer.'

'Oh, I would, you know, Perce, but after all, it's you who knows what the pot looks like.'

'Why, it looks just like a pot, Billy. Two handles and a big pot-shaped thing in the middle.'

'And since you won't be seeing much down in the dark water anyway, it doesn't matter much what it looks like, does it?' Crean added. 'I imagine it's more a groping sort of job.'

'Groping. Yes, that's what I'd expect. So don't you agree we'd do much better with a tall fellow like Tim here.' Billy clapped Tim on the back. 'His arms are much longer-- why, he's practically built for groping!'

They finally decided by drawing straws. Billy lost. He stripped off his clothes and waded into the freezing water.

'Oh, jeez-- I don't know enough swearwords for this!' Billy gasped.

'Easier if you just plunge on in, mate,' Tim encouraged.

'Oh, you think so? Oh, blast-- let's get on with it.' Crean grabbed hold of his ankles, and Billy took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and plunged, shrieking with the cold. He felt around in the dark murky water for the cupboard latch, then felt around in the mess of floating junk for the big iron pot. He was almost out of breath when his fingers struck the dense metal. He grabbed hold of it just as Crean yanked him out.

Billy held the pot triumphantly aloft. The other men cheered. Tim threw him a blanket, but Billy waved it off.

'I'm half froze already. Might as well get some more.' He plunged in twice more and pulled out three more pots before Crean, afraid to risk turning him into an icicle, called a halt to the effort. They rubbed him with blankets until his skin was red as a lobster, but Billy didn't warm up for hours.

Pots were good, but the real quest was for food. Right now the ration was about half a pound of food per man per day. It wasn't starving, but it wasn't much. Back home, a man could easily eat a half-pound steak for dinner. They had carried off several tons of food when they first left, but there was much more in the ship's hold.

'Only we have to break through decking a foot thick and three feet underwater,' McNeish explained. 'With nothing much to stand on and no tools to speak of.'

'It's impossible.' Vincent scowled. He sat on a piece of rubble and began to roll a cigarette.

'Aye.' McNeish nodded somberly. 'Impossible it is. You what that means, Blackie?' He winked at Perce.

'Impossible?' Perce knew what Shackleton would say. 'Means it's going to take a little longer.'

'Machines!' Hurley was bristling with energy. 'That's what we need, boys-- machines!' Hurley was never happier than when he was creating some new useful thing out of old bits and pieces. The task of breaking through the deck was a good challenge. He sharpened one of the ice chisels and rigged it to a block and tackle. They could hoist it up and let it drop like a pile driver. It took half a day to get through the thick deck, but once it was pierced, they could insert a long saw and

the job when quicker. A couple of hours sawing and finally they had an opening three feet square.

Wild wouldn't allow any more diving. 'It's too deep, and no one's going to last long enough to get much out anyway. Get the boat hooks and we'll see what we can drag out.'

They still had to stand knee deep in the freezing water, but no one minded when they were fishing for food. On the very first try, a barrel of walnuts floated up. The men cheered. Soon, other crates came bobbing up behind it. It was like the arcade game where you moved mechanical jaws to grab a toy from the pile; you never knew what you would get. There was a case of sugar, then one of flour. When they hauled up a case of strawberry jam, the men jumped up and down like kids. They opened the jar right there and passed it around, dipping their fingers into it with sloppy delight. Dried vegetables and lentils were less exciting but still welcome, but when Perce fished out a case of creamed spinach, he was loudly booed. They did not, however, throw it back.

Over the next few days, they made several more holes in the deck of the Endurance and eventually brought out three tons of food. Shackleton figured that with a steady supply of seal and penguin, they could eat comfortably for six months, but no one expected they would wait that long. It was early November; the Antarctica summer was just around the corner. Everyone was feeling optimistic.

DR. DANA: So there's a lot of conversation in that passage, but there's also a lot of information, not only about what's stored in the ship, but how the men are rationed. How did you go about blending-- or, what were your rules for fictionalizing history.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: All of the events that happened-- the fact that they first pulled up a case of walnuts, that they booed the spinach, that they made this pile driver to go through the decks-- all of that is completely true, and it's from all the various accounts. Many of the officers wrote journals. I read most of those. Shackleton wrote an entire book. Billy Bakewell, who was a good friend of Perce Blackborow, he was the only American on the ship. He wrote a memoir. So a lot of these are in historical record. And then, what I did was, embellish. What does it feel like to be in freezing cold water, and how do men joke with each other when they're having to do a bad task, and all those things. So that's the fictionalizing that I did.

DR. DANA: I'm waiting for you to say that you, as part of your research, jumped into the Potomac in winter.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: I have been through ice, actually fallen through ice, skating, not that deep. But it was cold. And as part of my research, I did actually live on their penguin diet-- a variation-- for several months. Once they were in camp, after six months or a year, they were eating really nothing but penguins, after a while. And so I wanted to see what that was like. For about three months I just ate two boiled chicken legs a day.

DR. DANA: Whoa.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: It was nothing you ever want to do. But it gave me a real feeling of, what is it like to crave vegetables, salad, fruit, bread. The men often, in the hut on Elephant Island, would-- they had a little penny cookbook with recipes-- and they would read aloud recipes at night for cakes, or roast beef, or something, and talk about what foods they would miss. A lot of them just wanted bread and butter.

DR. DANA: Wow. In addition to reading the diaries of the men on the expedition, you also read books written about this expedition. And you interviewed the descendants of some of the men on the expedition.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Yes, uh-huh.

DR. DANA: Who did you speak with?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Billy Bakewell's daughter, Elizabeth, is still living. And so she knew her father very well and heard a lot of the stories. And then at the time I was doing the research, Perce Blackborow's youngest brother was still alive-- the baby born while he was on the ship, so 20 years younger. He was in his 80s and unfortunately, had Alzheimer's. So he wasn't-- he knew, he remembered a few things. And then Perce's daughter, Joan, was also alive. And his grandson was a great help. I visited them in Wales and stayed with them. And he had a lot of memories of his grandfather, and had his polar medal that was awarded and a few other relics that he had saved from the journey.

DR. DANA: Did you find it intimidating to speak with them?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: No, they were very, very warm, and welcoming, and helpful. I think because, particularly because these were the lesser known members of the expedition, the family members were very proud to have their stories told in a way that really brought out that aspect of the journey.

DR. DANA: Wow. Amazing. Just absolutely amazing, because when you read historical accounts or encounter them in history books in school, they almost seem like they didn't happen because they're print on page. But then when you meet the descendants of them, when you hold the artifacts or the polar medals, it just seems to suddenly, almost like a jolt, create this connection with the event. And for me, I find it just sends me reeling, thinking, this is real. This really happened.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Oh yeah. Well, the most moving thing for me was the boat, the lifeboat, that they rigged up to sail for rescue to South Georgia Island, called the James Caird. That was salvaged, and was here in exhibit at the National Geographic. It's gone to several of the museums, too. And to see that in person was just-- I just cried.

DR. DANA: Why did you choose to write mainly from Perce's perspective?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: It was a different perspective than anything that had been written before. And although I like historical fiction a lot, I don't like fictionalizing real characters. For

example, everything in the book that's attributed to Ernest Shackleton himself is a direct quote, either from letters or from his own book. So I'm not going to make up things that he did or said. But Perce, Tim McCarthy, Tom Crean, a lot of his quotes-- he was also very taciturn. A lot of these men, they came back from the expedition and went right to war. And it was a time not of self-aggrandizing or celebrity, so many of them were never even known to have had this great feat until quite later in life.

DR. DANA: Another interesting thing about this expedition is how it's documented through photographs and motion pictures.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Yes.

DR. DANA: Did you analyze the photographs and motion pictures while writing this.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Yeah, I have a whole shelf of books, now. I have Caroline Alexander's book. And then there's one book of just photos. It's *South With Endurance: The Photographs of Frank Hurley*. It's a big, coffee table type book, Simon & Schuster, and if you're at all interested, this is just the most beautiful book. It has some of the color photos, photos of the camp with laundry hanging on tent pegs, and things. It's very, very wonderful.

DR. DANA: So what was the hardest part of the book to write?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Finishing it. I felt that I had been so involved with these men for so long, that I had been on this journey with them, that I was wrapped up in their lives, emotionally, that when it ended and I had to say goodbye to them, I was really, I was really kind of depressed. For several weeks I felt very lost. I wasn't with them anymore. They were gone. So I would say that.

DR. DANA: What was your favorite part to write?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: I think, definitely the scenes of the camaraderie, and the innovation, and meeting each challenge. I always felt like cheering them on and excited that they would go-- even though I knew the outcome, of course, when I started reading. That's another really fascinating thing about this story, is that we know the outcome. No one picks up a book wondering what's going to happen. And all of the factual accounts-- Caroline Alexander's book, Alfred Lansing's book, which was one of the first-- you pick the book up and you know, everyone lives. They all get to safety. But at the time you're reading it, you can't believe they're going to live.

DR. DANA: Right. So many things could have gone wrong. So many things--

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Did go wrong.

DR. DANA: It's just astounding that they all kept it together, and then went on-- some of them went on further expeditions with Shackleton.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Yeah. That really does speak to his loyalty and this Antarctic allure. People that I know who have traveled there even today, really talk of it being a very enticing, intoxicating, magical place. As harsh as it is, it really compels people.

DR. DANA: So you have written another book of historical fiction called *The Devil's Paintbox*. That, I feel, is more young adult. Are you working on anything else for children or young adults?

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: Yeah, I'm in the very last stages of editing not a sequel, but continuing adventures of the character from *Devil's Paintbox*. At the end of that book we leave him banished and lost and this picks up from there and goes on to the next set of adventures.

DR. DANA: Wonderful. I look forward to reading it.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: I look forward to finishing it.

DR. DANA: Victoria McKernan, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

VICTORIA MCKERNAN: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

**©2014 the Trustees of Princeton University**