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Outroduction: Thinning Ice, Concerning Ice

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This volume presents the outcome of our third FicSci writing retreat, an ongoing literary science communication experiment that brings art-makers and scientists together for the purpose of enquiry into the physical or environmental laws and processes that structure our world.

As will be evident to any reader who has already engaged with other parts of this volume, our invited scientist, Dr Tokoloho (TK) Rampai, is a specialist in sea ice and has undertaken many expeditions to both the north and south poles—though surely her heart, and indeed the bulk of her precious data, is with Antarctica. Although many forms of discovery hinge on an image of the scientist as explorer, venturing into territories as yet unmapped and little known, there is something about the extreme conditions of this planet's poles that offers an extra touch of the dramatic to the otherwise relatively prosaic notion of the laboratory. FicSci 03 is crammed with insights into what it takes to do science in Antarctica, and what Antarctica means as a whole to our sociality.

Our writers were transfixed by images and narratives of scientific discovery, yes, but also by modern-day tales of adventurous travel into the Southern Ocean, beyond the oceanic boundaries any of us had ever before passed. Along with the journey into the physics,

structures, properties and behaviours of sea ice, we also journeyed along with our Scientist on the Agulhas II, the icebreaker that is a scientific and cultural national treasure, property of the people of South Africa, and home to multidisciplinary scientific teams who travel out to Marion Island, the Southern Ocean and Antarctica on annual voyages. All of this was done in the quest to reorient ourselves to the ocean, the creatures that live in and on it, the climate and how it is changing, and more. It is hard to say whether the assembled writers were more stunned by the magnificent icy seascape photos from Dr Rampai's iPhone or the complexity of the equations invented to calculate how sea ice is formed, and melts, and the kinds of conditions under which it breaks. Perhaps it was the combination of both that made the 2024 FicSci workshop the most "intense" one yet, inviting all involved to rethink what we know (and what we don't know) about ice and the polar seascape.

The wild weather imagery that is a character in many of the creations assembled here was inspired not only by the journeying of imaginations into or towards the Antarctic; it was also a product of the howling gales and rain-battered windowpanes at our fingertips. The intensity of trying to wrap humanities' brains and word-orientated modes of communication around the hard properties of the maths and physics that underline crystalline science, was matched only by the intense weather conditions that seemed almost summoned by Muse herself to offer us a smattering of the wild, open ocean in our landlocked retreat. Yes, dear reader, we were ushered in and out of our retreat by gushing rains and howling winds. If you have picked up FicSci 01 (flow) or FicSci 02 (night_sky) you'll recall that this experimental gathering takes place at the back of a pretty little valley just outside Stellenbosch. To get there, one drives up a long, winding and increasingly narrow road to reach Mont Fleur. In the years before, the weather there has been delightful and decidedly un-wintery; in 2024 a massive low-pressure system hit the greater Cape Town area and it rained buckets—no, reservoirs!—by the minute. The unusually inclement weather patterns that marked our stay made us feel truly cut off from the rest of the world.

The collection before you is a product of fierce weather, combined with dreams of high-adrenaline extreme adventuring. It takes narratives of sea-voyaging, mixing them up with challenging and detailed deep slices into the very structure of ice. The result is one we are truly proud of. To be sure, these icy writings muse on multiple aspects of the human condition: the pain of leaving behind, the excitement of seeing ahead, the brace of diving under, the expanse of breathing in, the discomfort of exposure (both physical and emotional), and a broader contemplation of the age of the end of ice. This volume offers a number of new ways of looking at the coldest parts of our world, and bearing witness to how, in this age of climate change, our ice is melting away.

FicSci 03 introduced another new aspect to our experiment. We decided to liaise with a new NRF-funded project, which aims to establish an Antarctic Artist and Writers Programme (AWP) for South Africa. Many other countries that do research on the White Continent have long had such luxuries, but South Africa has not—until now. Hearing of this bold move towards staking a South African writerly and artistic claim to the Antarctic science being advanced collectively by humanity was precisely what inspired us to seek out an Antarctic scientist for FicSci 03. In turn, we have encouraged the writers featured in this volume to apply for the chance of joining that residency. Many more wonderful artistic and creative outputs will surely result from the opportunities being created by the AWP, both for communicating Antarctic science, and for helping to create more possibilities for South African and African publics to get to know, and be inspired by, Antarctica.

Another innovation to FicSci 03 was the invitation of a songwriter. By acknowledging that writing is an expansive practice, that includes multiple forms of creative production alongside those that use words, we were hoping to find new ways to redefine science communication. As you will see from Senna-Marie Bosman's contribution, a song was written at FicSci 03. Its lyrics and musical notation are included for the musically inclined to read it, and play it, but you can also see and hear Senna-Marie performing

her composition in a music video funded by the SARChI Science Communication by clicking on the QR code in her chapter.

By this third iteration, as convenors and editors of the emergent work, we feel that the unique contribution of FicSci is becoming perhaps as clear as glaze ice: there is something singularly powerful, fertile and fun that happens when creative writers get a chance to pause with science, to face it, crunch their brain cells to seek routes of understanding into scientific knowledge, and then to be permitted to take that knowledge and build on or transform or create, using their own writerly craft and their own imaginations. It is true that scientists speak a peculiar language, and creatives another, and that translation and interpretation is needed to reach some communion between the two.

Yet, perfect mutual understanding is not what is required. Perhaps it is enough to spend time together in one another's modes of enquiry, and then to allow the science to continue, and the writing to continue; each somehow touched by the other, each somehow knowing more of the other, and each secure in its own status as a knowledge production system that works to make sense of existence.