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How cold transformed geography and history

Chicago Tribune (IL) - Wednesday, September 2, 2009

Author: Emily Stone, SPECIAL TO TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

' Cold : Adventures in the World's Frozen Places '

By Bill Streever

Little, Brown and Co., \$24.99, 292 pages

As weather patterns go, **cold** has a PR problem.

The public's focus is on warmth. We're inundated -- and rightfully so -- with stories about rising temperatures, melting ice and worsening droughts, wildfires and hurricanes.

Yet **cold** has shaped **the** planet for millennia. Glaciers carved out lakes, rivers and valleys. During periods of extreme **cold** , ocean water was sucked into ice and **the** Bering Land Bridge opened, allowing humans and animals to cross into **the** Americas. **Cold** helped win and lose wars -- think Napoleon **in** Russia.

Biologist Bill Streever seeks to rectify this imbalance and give **cold** its due. **In " Cold : Adventures in the World's Frozen Places "**, he makes a compelling case for **the** power of **cold** , both its obvious and far more subtle impacts on **the** Earth and human history. Beyond creating landscapes and dictating plant and animal evolution, he explains, for example, how low temperatures helped produce **the** bicycle and Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein."

Streever produces interesting non-weather related factoids too. Air conditioning allowed buildings to grow taller because windows no longer needed to open. Cryogenics changed **the** way we think about birth and death, with sperm, eggs and cadavers preserved through freezing.

Streever blends history, science and stories of his own wanderings on skis, snowmobile and foot, mostly near his Anchorage home. We hear too much about his outings -- some sections read like journal excerpts. And his constant notation of **the** date and temperature wherever he happened to be at that moment, be it Alaska, Orlando or London, seems arbitrary. He could have better used that space detailing others' modern **adventures in the cold** , perhaps a wintering team of scientists at **the** South Pole or **the** crew of an Arctic icebreaker.

The narrative improves when he leaves his own activities behind.

We travel with Adolphus Greely, who led 25 men to within 400 miles of **the** North Pole **in** 1881 before getting **frozen in** and waiting three years for a rescue ship to reach **the** seven survivors.

"Before it was over, Greely's men experienced an intense aloneness and ate caterpillars. ...

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The men divided **the** soles of an old pair of boots.

Later, there would be accusations of cannibalism." One of **the** rescued men had a metal spoon tied to **the** stump of his right arm where his hand should have been.

We learn that certain frogs and caterpillars spend **the** winter **frozen** , then thaw out perfectly intact. Humans have it harder. Streever explains that we start shivering when our core body temperature drops to 97 degrees because muscle contractions generate four times more heat than a body at rest. Frostbite occurs when ice crystals form inside skin cells, shredding **the** cell membranes and causing flesh to die.

Several interesting sections discuss **cold** as a cultural force. **In** 1815, a massive volcanic eruption occurred **in** Indonesia. **The** resulting layer of dust **in the** stratosphere changed global weather patterns, and summer temperatures **in** 1816 dropped up to 8 degrees. It snowed **in** New England **in** June. Farms were crippled, and thousands headed west, including Joseph Smith, who later founded **the** Mormon Church.

In Europe, food shortages made feeding horses expensive, spurring **the** creation of a contraption that evolved into **the** bicycle. Lord Byron's friends gathered at his lake house, but **the cold** kept them inside. Byron challenged them to write ghost stories, and Shelley produced "Frankenstein."

For all his reverence of **cold** , Streever is well aware of **the** gathering storm. Temperatures are rising and ice is melting as we pump more greenhouse gases into **the** atmosphere. After cataloging **the** ability of **cold** to shape geological, biological and cultural history, he ends by wondering what changes warmth will leave **in** its wake.

Caption: Photo(s)

Photo: ' **Cold** : **AdventuresintheWorld'sFrozenPlaces** ' By Bill Streever Little, Brown and Co., \$24.99, 292 pages

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