Robyn Mundy, a member of that select band of people who have lived and worked in Antarctica, has set her first novel *The Nature of Ice* on what is often thought of as the white continent, although she challenges that perception. She traces the fortunes of an Australian photographer, Freya Jorgensen, summering at Davis Station to work on a tribute to Frank Hurley. However, though Hurley and his 1912 Antarctic photos are the focus of Freya’s artistic project, it’s Douglas Mawson whose story alternates with the contemporary narrative.

Both Mawson and Freya have someone back in Australia who occupies their thoughts, but there are several significant differences. One is technological: in 1912 communication is still dependent on letters sent via ships which make the journey back to Australia only once a season, while Freya is in daily email contact with her husband Marcus. The precise nature of their relationship takes some time to unfold (though the reader’s curiosity is somewhat blunted by the tactless disclosure on the back cover that Freya is ‘a woman coming to terms with the breakdown of her marriage’) but a new relationship is beginning with Chad, a seasoned ‘tradey’ she meets at Davis. In contrast, Douglas and Paquita Mawson were at this time at the threshold of a long marriage, and his mental image of her motivates his struggle for survival. So Mundy at least hasn’t fallen into the trap of creating an obvious parallel between the two threads of her narrative; but then the question arises of what the function of the dual structure is, beyond a simple then-and-now contrast.

Antarctica has been tamed in many ways by the twenty-first century. There’s an ordinariness about the modernity of the bubble created at Davis Station, with film nights, fancy dress parties, and the sort of personal and occupational rivalries you get in any smallish group of people thrown together for a period, using their own special jargon. But though they get around using helicopters and quad bikes rather than dog sleds, the Antarctic is still inexorable in its power to thwart human plans. It’s significant that when Freya is on her way back to Australia she chooses to communicate with the man she’s left behind in Antarctica by means of a letter which will not reach him until another season has lapsed, rather than by the facile immediacy of email.

Another difference is more about perception than reality: ‘Hurley’s vast collection of black and white photographs define their time and place in photographic history. It dawns on Freya how influential his images have become in shaping a collective understanding of the past: they do not simply preserve the memory of Antarctica and the first Australian expedition, they compel the mind into imagining the past in black and white.’ (306) Freya’s exhibition, on the other hand, will be ‘a celebration of colour’ – the colour she has to her surprise discovered all around her in the Antarctic summer.

*The Nature of Ice* was written as part of a creative writing PhD, and although I’m reluctant to disparage the teaching of creative writing in universities, I must say that this novel seems to labour under the freight of its genesis. If it isn’t a positive requirement that such projects have a historical component which needs solid research (to be duly acknowledged in the back matter) running in parallel with a contemporary narrative based on the author’s experiences, it nevertheless is such a common pattern that one suspects some perhaps unspoken fashion or cultural expectation is operating.

The biggest problem with *The Nature of Ice* is its pacing. The first half of the book – or more – is spent setting the scene and although the intention is to impress upon the reader the natural beauty of the surroundings, it is all rather too earnest and a little dull. The main characters take quite some time to
engage the reader’s interest, while the caddish villain Adam is too much of a stereotype to be taken seriously as a threat to Freya’s wellbeing: he, along with the slightly breathless romantic ending, seems to belong in a different novel. It’s an artistic odyssey, a romance between two lonely individuals, complete with back-stories for both, a historical novel, an exploration of ideas about nature, art and beauty.... maybe Mundy is trying to do too much, without enough of an overarching vision to bring it all together into a satisfying whole.