INTO THE ICE
The Story of Arctic Exploration
by Lynn Curlee

Genre
Narrative nonfiction often recounts a series of events. Look for a number of related events as you read.

Question of the Week
What drives people to explore harsh climates and dangerous places?
The great pioneer in the search for the North Pole was a brilliant young Norwegian scientist named Fridtjof Nansen. Also an athlete, outdoorsman, artist, and poet, Nansen wrote of the strange atmospheric effect called the *northern lights*, “The aurora borealis shakes over the vault of heaven its veil of glittering silver—changing now to yellow, now to green, now to red... It shimmers in tongues of flame... until the whole melts away in the moonlight... like the sigh of a departing spirit.”

In 1888, at the age of twenty-six, Nansen organized his first *expedition*—a trek across Greenland on skis, a feat never before accomplished. Dropped off by ship on the uninhabited east coast, Nansen and five companions had no choice but to ski westward to civilization, carrying only the provisions required for the one-way journey.

This kind of bold yet calculated risk-taking was typical of Nansen. He carefully planned every detail, even designing his own equipment. He also knew how to improvise off the land, adopting Inuit methods such as the use of dog sledges, kayaks, and snow houses.

After the Greenland trek, Nansen became interested in the idea of *polar drift*. In 1884, in the ice near Greenland, some debris was found from the *Jeannette*, a ship crushed in the ice off Siberia in 1881. There was only one possible explanation: the ice and debris had drifted around the entire Arctic Ocean. Nansen had a breathtaking proposal: he would sail a ship directly into the ice pack off Siberia, deliberately let it be frozen in, and drift with the ice across the top of the world, penetrating the heart of the Arctic.

Nansen’s small ship, the *Fram* (*Onward* in Norwegian), was specially designed with a hull that would ride up over the crushing ice and living spaces *insulated* with cork and felt. Fully provisioned with scientific equipment and supplies for five years, the *Fram* had workshops, a smithy, and even a windmill for electricity. On June 24, 1893, the *Fram* sailed from Norway. By September 25, Nansen and his crew of twelve were frozen fast in the polar ice pack off Siberia.
As they drifted slowly northward, the expedition settled into a routine of scientific observation. The ship was so comfortable that by the end of the second winter Nansen was restless and bored. Now only 360 miles from the North Pole, Nansen decided to strike out over the ice.

In the arctic dawn of mid-March 1895, Nansen set out with one companion, Hjalmar Johansen, three sledges of provisions, twenty-eight dogs, and two kayaks. As in Greenland, there could be no turning back—this time their home base was drifting. For three weeks they struggled northward, maneuvering the sledges over jumbled fields and immense ridges of broken ice. By early April they were still 225 miles from the Pole, and the drifting ice was carrying them south almost as quickly as they could push north. Provisions were also running low, so they reluctantly headed for the nearest land, three hundred miles to the south. As the weeks passed and the sun rose higher, the broken surface of the ice pack became slushy, then treacherous as lanes of water called *leads* opened and closed between the ice floes. It took four months to reach land. After provisions ran out, the men survived by hunting seals in the open leads and by feeding the weak dogs to the stronger ones.

Nansen and Johansen finally found a remote island. With no hope of rescue, the two men prepared for the winter, building a tiny hut and butchering walrus and bears for a supply of meat and warm furs. They survived the winter in *isolation*, burning greasy blubber for heat and light and growing fat on the diet of oily meat. When the ice broke up in the spring, Nansen and Johansen set out in their kayaks. On June 13, 1896—one year and four months after leaving the *Fram*—they were picked up by an English expedition. Two months later the *Fram* and its crew broke free of the ice in the ocean east of Greenland, more than a thousand miles from their starting point. The scientific expedition was a triumphant success, and Nansen and Johansen had gone farther north than anyone had before.
Now the race to the North Pole was on. Another daring attempt was made the very next year—a flight to the Pole in a balloon. Salomon Andrée was a Swedish engineer with experience in aeronautics and an interest in the Arctic. He had built a large hydrogen-filled balloon with a passenger gondola designed to hold three men, four months of supplies, sledges, and a small boat.

Developed more than one hundred years earlier, balloons were still the only means of flight in the 1890s. As transportation they have serious limitations: first, they cannot be steered; and second, they are sensitive to temperature changes. Andrée tried to solve the first problem with a complicated system of sails and drag lines. He completely ignored the second problem, and the result was disastrous.

In midsummer 1897 the Ornen (Eagle in Swedish) lifted off from Spitsbergen, an island north of Norway. As they sailed northward Andrée wrote in his journal, “The rattle of the drag lines in the snow and the flapping of the sails are the only sound, except for the whining of the wind.” As the balloon was alternately heated by the sun and cooled by freezing fog, the precious gas that kept them aloft leaked away. By the third day the Ornen was down on the ice, two hundred miles from land. In the Arctic summer at the edge of the ice pack, Andrée and his two companions faced a terrifying world of slushy, grinding floes and open leads; it took them three months to struggle to the nearest island. But inexperienced and unprepared, they were unable to survive the winter. We know what happened only because thirty-three years later their frozen remains were found, along with Andrée’s journal and another eerie relic—undeveloped images of the doomed expedition that were still in their camera.

PHYSICALLY, THE NORTH Pole is nothing more than a theoretical point on the Earth’s surface—but reaching it came to symbolize mankind’s mastery of the entire planet—and a landmark human achievement. An American naval engineer desperately wanted to be the first explorer to stand on the North Pole. Robert E. Peary first entered the Arctic in 1886. For twenty years he mounted expeditions to northwest Greenland, looking for the best route north. Peary was not particularly interested in scientific discovery or mapping. He had one goal: the glory of being first. Over the years, Peary came to believe that it was his destiny to conquer the North Pole.
Vain and arrogant, Robert Peary ran his expeditions like a military campaign. His chief lieutenant was his personal assistant, Matthew Henson, a man of African descent. This was unusual at the turn of the century, but then, Peary was unconventional in many ways. He also took his wife on some of his early expeditions. Josephine Peary was the first white woman in the High Arctic, and she gave birth to their daughter while on expedition. Inuit came from miles around to see the newborn blond “snowbaby.”

As an explorer, Peary was innovative, taking ideas from everyone and improving on them. But the Polar Inuit were the key to his success. Inuit women made his furs, and Inuit men used their own dogs to pull his sledges. They built his snowhouses on the trail and hunted for his meat in exchange for metal tools and other material goods. On one occasion Peary pushed himself so relentlessly that his feet froze. When his fur boots were removed, several of his toes snapped off. As soon as the stumps healed, he was back on the trail.

In 1906 Peary made a full-scale assault upon the North Pole. His plan was to take a ship as far north as possible, winter over in Greenland or the Canadian Islands, then strike out for the Pole in late February, before the ice pack started breaking up. The Arctic did not cooperate, however. When only a hundred miles out on the ice pack, the expedition was delayed several days by a broad lead, then a blizzard kept them camp-bound for another week. Supplies dwindled, and the disappointed Peary had to settle for a new furthest-north record, 175 miles from the Pole.

After another appeal to the men who financed his expeditions, Peary sailed from New York in July 1908 in the Roosevelt, named for Theodore Roosevelt, then President of the United States and the explorer’s most enthusiastic supporter. Peary was fifty-two years old, and he knew that this was his last expedition.
But Peary was not the only explorer in the Arctic in 1908. There was also Dr. Frederick A. Cook, a veteran of both the Arctic and the Antarctic, which was just then being explored. Cook had been the physician on one of Peary's earlier expeditions. Always jealous and overbearing, Peary had refused to allow Cook to publish an article about his experiences and they had quarreled. Now the doctor was rumored to be thinking about his own attempt on the North Pole. Peary dismissed the rumors, he considered Cook an amateur, not in the same league as himself.

On March 1, 1909, Peary stood on the frozen shore of the Arctic Ocean and faced north. With him were 23 men, 19 sledges, and 133 dogs. For the next month Matt Henson led out in front, breaking trail, while Peary rode a sledge in the rear, supervising the troops. Other sledges traveled back and forth relaying tons of supplies northward. Nevertheless, the return trip that was stored in snowhouses strung out over almost five hundred miles of floating, shifting ice. Everything had been carefully calculated, down to the sacrificing of weak dogs to feed the strong.

For the final dash to the Pole, Peary took only Henson and three Inuit. The entry in his diary for April 6, 1909, reads, “The Pole at last!!! The prize of 3 centuries, my dream & ambition for 23 years. MINE at last.”

Or was it?

PERRY CAME HOME to the stunning news that Dr. Cook had already returned, claiming to have reached the North Pole on April 21, 1908, a year before Peary. In the investigations that followed, Peary accused Cook of lying, and it was demonstrated that Cook had lied once before when he claimed to have climbed Mt. McKinley in Alaska, North America’s highest peak. Lacking documentation or witnesses, except for two Inuit companions who said they were never out of sight of land, Cook’s claim to have reached the Pole was officially rejected.
Then, incredibly, Peary was also unable to completely verify his own claim. The careful explorer was a sloppy navigator, and from his solar observations and daily journal it was impossible to say that he had stood at the Pole. Henson and the Inuit were unable to take solar readings, so it was Peary’s word against Cook’s. Commander Robert E. Peary was finally given the credit and made a rear-admiral, but his great prize was tarnished, and he died an embittered man. As for Cook, he vowed until his dying day that he had reached the North Pole. In recent years, historical researchers have determined that neither man actually stepped foot on the northernmost point of the globe.

THE CLASSIC ERA of Arctic exploration ended with Peary. Attention then shifted to the Antarctic and to the South Pole, which Roald Amundsen reached in 1911. Three years later the world was at war and most exploration was postponed. When it resumed in the 1920s the world was a different place. Balloons were no longer the only means of flight, and several attempts were made to fly to the North Pole in small airplanes.

For many years Richard E. Byrd was given credit for the first successful flight, but his claim is now disputed. In 1926 Roald Amundsen flew across the entire Arctic Ocean in an Italian dirigible piloted by its designer, Umberto Nobile. The first person to stand at the North Pole, whose claim is undisputed, is Joseph Fletcher, a United States Air Force pilot who landed there in 1952. Arctic flights are great achievements, but they are achievements of technology, somehow different from crossing nearly five hundred miles of shifting ice by dog sledge and then returning. Although many people have now stood at the North Pole, no one has ever completed Peary’s journey without being resupplied by plane or airlifted out.

*This map shows the routes of various Arctic explorers.*
Think Critically

1. Compare Robert Peary to another real-life adventurer you have read about. Describe how the adventurers’ goals and obstacles were alike and different. Text to Text

2. This author gives you a bit of information about the personalities of two of the explorers. How does he help you get to know Nansen and Peary? Think Like an Author

3. What caused Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen to leave the Fram when they were 360 miles away from the North Pole and frozen in the polar ice? What were some of the effects of this adventure? Cause and Effect

4. What information from the selection helps you form an opinion about Solomon Andréé’s attempt to reach the North Pole in a balloon? Important Ideas

5. Look Back and Write. Beyond personal fame, why would explorers have attempted to reach the North Pole? Look back at page 33 to find the author’s answer. Write it in your own words. Then write a paragraph about whether that reason is still important today. Provide evidence to support your answer. Test Practice Extended Response