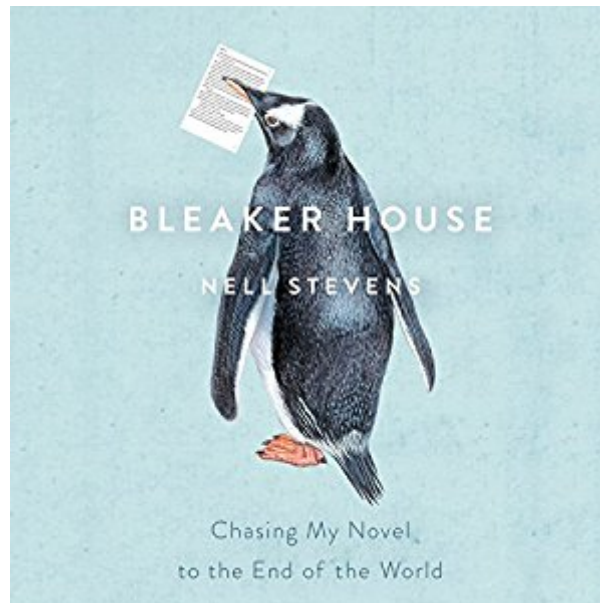




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# **Bleaker House: Chasing My Novel To The End Of The World**



## Synopsis

A whimsical blend of memoir and travelogue, laced with wry writing advice, *Bleaker House* is a story of creative struggle that brilliantly captures the self-torture of the writing life. Twenty-seven-year-old Nell Stevens was determined to write a novel, but life kept getting in the way. Then came a game-changing opportunity: she won a fellowship that would let her spend three months, all expenses paid, anywhere in the world to research and write a book. Would she choose a glittering metropolis, a romantic village, an exotic paradise? Not exactly. Nell chose Bleaker Island, a snowy, windswept pile of rock in the Falklands. There, in a guesthouse where she would be the only guest, she could finally rid herself of distractions and write. In three months, surely she'd have a novel. And sure enough, other than sheep, penguins, paranoia, and the weather, there aren't many distractions on Bleaker. Nell gets to work on a delightful Dickensian fiction she calls *Bleaker House* - only to discover that total isolation and 1,100 calories a day are far from ideal conditions for literary production. With deft humor, the memoir traces Nell's island days and slowly reveals details of the life and people she has left behind in pursuit of her writing. They pop up in her novel, too, and in other fictional pieces that dot the book. It seems that there is nowhere Nell can run - an island or the pages of her notebook - to escape the big questions of love, art, and ambition. As Nell races to finish her book, *Bleaker House* marks the arrival of a remarkable literary talent.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hours 11 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Random House Audio

Audible.com Release Date: March 14, 2017

Language: English

ASIN: B01N10X2W7

Best Sellers Rank: #94 in Books > Travel > South America > General #176 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Language Arts & Disciplines #180 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Travel

## Customer Reviews

This book breaks lots of rules but showcases the author's impressive skills. I'd like to read more from her, i.e, any of the stories within this story carried through to the end. In a class by itself.

Kudos, Nell.

Loved this - a real insight into how hard it is to write a book! Engaging and kept you wanting to know what happened next.

This is Stevens's first book but she was a finalist for the 2011 Elle magazine writing talent contest and runner-up in two writing contests (one memoir, the other short fiction) in 2014-15. Combine that with a bachelor's degree in English and creative writing (Warwick), study at Harvard (Arabic and Comparative Literature) and an MFA in fiction at Boston University, where she received a graduate fiction award, and you have a formidable combination. Oh, did I mention she just completed her Ph.D. in Victorian literature at King's College London? This book is an odd but appealing join: it's part memoir, part travel book and part fiction, and it is inspired by Dickens's very odd but masterly novel, *Bleak House*. Stevens's book narrates her trip to the Falkland Islands, located off the southernmost tip of South America, and in particular her six-week stay on Bleaker Island (serendipitous name!), a desolate pile of rocks and dirt eight miles square, inhabited during her stay in the winter (winters aren't nice down there), aside from Nell, by only the occasional sea lion or seal, about a thousand sheep and several cows, a colony of gentoo penguins and countless other birds, including one large aggressive raptor called the caracara (it's characterized on the website [allaboutbirds](http://allaboutbirds.org) as "a tropical falcon version of a vulture"). There are no trees. The wind blows. A lot. And if lack of sunlight affects your moods, prepare for mood swings. She went there on a grant, her hope that the enforced solitude and straitened regimen would force her to be the novelist she aspired to be. All told, she had bought herself three months of being on her own: during that time, she must write 90,000 words (rough draft - she'd revise later - only 2500 words a day). She had to carry her food with her for the entire stay: money and freight weight limits meant that she'd live on 1,000 some calories a day. In seemingly disjointed order, this memoir tells what happened to her there and what it taught her about herself and about writing. It spins out and tumbles out at points - in chapters on her life on the island, her life before arriving there, about an old boyfriend she finally left and what that incident said about her ability to connect, the advice of her writing teacher at Boston U. (the great Leslie Epstein) and scattered chapters from the novel she never finished, which paralleled some of the tropes of Victorian fiction but set on Bleaker Island. The result is a book that will not appeal to

everyone but that I enjoyed quite a bit. I have been trying myself to find ways to write my experience not sequentially but with tangential connections, and that's what she does here. If you're looking for a travel book, this isn't it. If you're looking for a finished novel, no again. But if you want to follow along as a young writer, with a strong vein of whimsy included in her makeup, find herself, this may be your cup of tea.

ARG! To say that I have a love/hate relationship with this book is putting it mildly. This is actually a series of stories stuck together with non fiction. I was attracted to this book because it was set on an Island in the Falklands, a place I am very partial to. Saying that, I will add that I have gone only in the summer, have not been marooned alone on an island and have had fabulous meals ( try the Tooth Fish!!).I loved her descriptions of the Islands, I hated her lack of knowledge of the islands. A bright person, with scholarships to her name but never dealt with the reality of life on the Falklands I find mystifying. Her lack of preparation/research for her "adventure " is amazing. Her hardships are of her own making and I thank the kind and generous Falklanders for doing what they could to help her out.I do applaud her for bringing all this disfunctionality together and getting a book out of it. It has certainly been a rollercoaster read, between the fiction and the non fiction, All I can say is, "Try it, you might like it."

The place really only matters in that is it, well, bleak, especially for those used to cities, but Stevens doesn't explore much. That is, she doesn't explore the area and nature around her, despite the penguin on the cover. She does explore her life, so far, and her writing.Writers, and those interested in the writing life, will likely find more in this book than nature lovers. I felt the book lived up to the "Chasing My Novel" part of its subtitle, but the "to the End of the World" part was so minor it should not be in the subheading. Yes, it did happen in the Falklands, but from what Stevens appears to gain from her surroundings, it could very well have been the much closer Scottish islands instead. But, of course, that would have spoiled the "to the end of the world" gimmick. Perhaps to those who have never spent any time away from cities this book has more to offer along the "end of the world" theme.I found the writing jumbled. The chapters are short and shift back and forth between the novel she was working on, memories from the past, and what is going on the present. It felt rather like reading a blog. Short bits of this and that. I did not enjoy the way sex was used as it seemed that it was there more for attention than

for having something worthwhile to offer. Overall, the book came across as emotional but shallow.

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