

First Light

Rebecca Stead

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Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for lower secondary

Resource kit contains

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Synopsis

Peter is thrilled to be going to Greenland where his father studies climate change. But on the ice cap, Peter is troubled by a series of visions that both frighten and entice him. What is the strange red entwined circle he sees in the ice? Where is his dog trying to lead him?

Thea has never seen the sun. Her people, suspected of witchcraft and driven almost to extinction, have retreated to a secret world they've built deep within an Arctic glacier. As Thea dreams of a way back to the surface, Peter's search for answers takes him to her hidden world.

Together they unravel a past that reveals a surprising connection.

Rebecca Stead's fascinating debut novel is a warm tale of mystery, science and the importance of striving for what you believe in.

About the author

Rebecca Stead grew up in New York City where she now enjoys life as a full-time writer with her husband and two sons. She won the Newbery Medal, the world's oldest children's book award, for her second novel, *When You Reach Me*. *First Light* is her first book.

Author's note

I grew up in New York City, where I was lucky enough to attend the kind of elementary school where a person could sit in a windowsill, or even under a table, and read a book, and no one told you to come out and be serious (well, eventually someone did, but not right away).

It was at school that I began writing. Sometimes I invented stories, and other times I just wrote down things I overheard—jokes, or snatches of conversation.

Much, much later, I became a lawyer (I believed that being a writer was impractical), got married, and started working as a public defender. But I still wrote *Very Serious Stories* when I could find the time.

My first child, a fabulous son, was born. A few years later, I had another fabulous son. There wasn't much time for writing stories after that. But I still tried.

One day, my then four-year-old son, though fabulous, accidentally pushed my laptop off the dining-room table, and the *Very Serious Stories* were gone. Poof.

So. It was time to write something new. Something joyful (to cheer me up: I was pretty grouchy about the lost stories). I went to a bookstore and bought an armload of books that I remembered loving as a kid. I read them. I went back to the store and bought more books. I read them. And then I began to write, and I began to love writing. That's when I became a writer.

Some people will tell you that real writers don't use parentheses (which is nonsense). The most important thing to know about writing is that there are no rules.

Pre-reading notes and activities

Notes on genre and style

- *First Light* could be considered a work of 'science fiction'. Science fiction is a literary genre similar to fantasy, except set in the real universe (including Earth and outer space). It may involve alien life forms, and it commonly examines the imagined impact of science on society in the future.
- There are also aspects of 'paranormal fiction' in *First Light*. 'Paranormal' means something that lies outside the range of normal experience and defies scientific explanation. Paranormal fiction differs from fantasy fiction in that it is almost always set

in the 'real world' and concerns human characters to whom strange and magical things happen. Examples of paranormal fiction include books about vampires, ghosts, werewolves, fallen angels or characters who discover they have some kind of supernatural or magical power.

- *First Light* tells two stories—Thea's story and Peter's story—running parallel. Sometimes these stories alternate chapter by chapter. In other cases, a character's story might be told for more than one chapter. The stories are told in the 'third person omniscient point of view', which means that the story is told by a narrator who is a god-like figure and knows everything, even what is going on in character's heads.

Themes

- Family, DNA, abuse of power, determination, loyalty, discovery, truth, global warming, persecution, betrayal, illness, city versus wilderness, mutation, friendship, family, sharing or concealment of knowledge, sustainable communities, belief, science

Symbols

- Maps, snow, ice, light and dark, vision, molecular structure, eggs, fur, blindness, the runt puppy, paper, stars and constellations, notebooks

Activities

- Peter's mother, Rory, keeps a secret notebook. As you read the book, keep a notebook of your own with clues to the big secrets in the book. Every time you read a part of the book that might be a secret clue to what is really going on, write it down. As you collect more clues, make predictions about what you think the big secrets in the book are.
- Many of the words in this book are American versions of words we use. For example for 'flashlight' we would use 'torch'. As you read, keep notes of American words and match them with their Australian definitions.
- There are many words in this book that are only used by the people from Gracehope. Keep a record of them, and what you think their meanings are.
- There are many metaphors in this book. Find out what a metaphor is. Keep a note of metaphors in the book.
- *First Light* is the title of this book, and the characters mention it quite often in the story. What do you think 'first light' symbolises? Think about this as you read the book and, at the end, write a short report on what you think 'first light' symbolises in the book.
- Have a look at the cover of this book. What clues does it give you about what the book might be about? Write a short piece about what you believe the book will be like, based on the cover.

- Read the blurb of this book. Based on the blurb, do you think you will enjoy this book? Why or why not?
- *First Light* could be considered a book of science fiction. Have you ever read a science fiction book before? Write a little bit about it. Did you enjoy this book? Why or why not?
- *First Light* could be considered a book of paranormal fiction. Have you ever read a paranormal fiction book before? Write a little bit about it. Did you enjoy this book? Why or why not?
- As you read *First Light*, keep a record of which aspects of the book you think are paranormal and which are science fiction. At the end of your reading, decide which category the book most falls into.

Art and drama activities

- Peter has a very strange bedroom (p.6). Describe your bedroom in as much detail as possible, or draw a detailed picture of it.
- What would the world be like if there were no photographs? People might go back to painting pictures of the things they see. Take a favourite photograph and draw or paint a picture of it.
- What do you think a Chikchu would look like? Draw a picture of one.
- On page 72, Peter describes the tent in great detail. Using his descriptions, draw a picture of the inside of the tent.
- Using the description of the settler's map (p.102), draw a picture of it.
- Draw a map of your town/street/suburb filling in important landmarks and favourite places.
- On page 207, Peter wonders if he has just been to a place that nobody else knows about. Do you have a special place you like to go that nobody knows about? Write a descriptive piece about this place or draw a picture of it.
- On page 229, we find out that Thea's mother met a man on the surface and became friends with him. Write and perform a duologue from the perspectives of Mai and this man, where Mai tells him about the place she comes from.
- Write and act out a duologue between Mai and Rowen taking place on the day that Mai is sent to the outside world. (p.230) Use props and costume to make your performance more entertaining for the audience
- Act out the scene where Thea addresses the council on page 295. Use props and costume to make your performance more entertaining for the audience
- Write and present a short play set a year after the events of the book. What has happened now? Use props and costume to make your performance more entertaining for the audience.

- Write and act out a monologue detailing the events of this story from Rory's point of view. Use props and costume to make your performance more entertaining for the audience.
- Pick your favourite scene in the book and act it out. Use props and costume to make the scene more entertaining for your audience.

Creative writing activities

- Write a poem where the first line is 'first light'.
- Peter says, 'No one can describe a headache to someone who has never had one.'(p.3) Could you describe a headache to someone who has never had one? Write a piece doing just that. Be as descriptive as possible.
- 'Everyone said how much Peter was like his mother.'(p.4) Are you very similar to anyone in your family? Write a profile of this person and describe the things that make you similar.
- Miles and Peter know everything about each other. Do you have a friend you know everything about? List five things about them that nobody else knows. If you would prefer, you can pretend you have a friend you know everything about and list five things about them that nobody else knows. Be creative in your answers.
- Peter says living with his father 'was a little like living with Clark Kent but never once getting to meet Superman.'(p.8) Imagine your mum or dad has a superpower. What would it be? Write a short story in which you discover their power.
- Write a list of ten things you'd miss about home if you went away for six weeks.
- Look around the room and pick five objects. Invent new names for them like Miles does on page 13.
- 'Miles away!' is Miles' 'sign-off' (his way of saying goodbye). Invent a sign-off for yourself. Explain why you chose it.
- What would you do if it was your last day in your town or city? Think of the top five things you would really want to do before you left, or places you would want to visit. Write a short review of each of these activities or locations, explaining why they are so important to you.
- What would you pack if you were going on a trip to the Arctic? Make a list of ten items and your reasons for packing them.
- What do you think is the very worst possible thing that could happen to the family on their adventure? Write a short story in which this terrible event occurs. Be creative in your answer!
- Rushberries are a kind of berry that only exist in Thea's land. Draw a picture of what you think a rushberry would look like. What would it taste similar to? Think up a recipe using rushberries as the main ingredient and write down its ingredients and how to make it.
- Write a poem about the sky to explain it to someone who has never seen it. Think of all the ways the sky can change. It's not always blue!
- The bracelets that Thea wears are a family tradition. Write a short story about a family who has a very strange tradition.
- Thea is nervous about addressing the council (p.38). Has there been a time in your life when you have had to do something that made you nervous? Write about your memory of this time.
- On page 43, Thea's 'heart galloped furiously.' This is a metaphor. Find out what a metaphor is. Write a poem about your heart beating quickly, using a different metaphor you have created. For example, you heart might beat like a bongo drum or it might feel like you have a squirming kitten in your chest!
- Have you got a pet? Write a short story about the time when you first saw it or cuddled it. If you can't remember, write about a fun time you've had together.
- Think about the coldest you have ever felt. Write a poem about what this felt like.
- On page 67, Peter says he is used to hearing honking trucks and car alarms when he is trying to sleep. What sounds do you hear when you're trying to sleep? Write a poem about these noises.
- 'Peter's father said a celebration wasn't a celebration without steak and cake.'(p.68) Write about your perfect celebration. What food would you have? Would you have music or games? Who would you invite if you could invite anyone in the world? Write a short story about this dream celebration!
- Peter's mother said her brain couldn't function without fresh fruit or vegetables.(p.70) Is there a food you feel like you couldn't 'function' without? Write a descriptive piece about this food.
- Would you like to hear the thoughts of your pets? What do you think they would say to you? Write a short story from the point of view of your pet telling you all the things he has been wanting to tell you!
- On page 129, Peter says being in the sled makes his mind feel empty—he forgets his troubles. Is there something you like to do that makes you forget your troubles and stress? Write a short piece about the thing you like to do and how it makes you feel. If you like, write a poem about it.
- On page 131, Jonas tells Peter some of the technical terms in glaciology. Do you have a hobby, sport or favourite subject that has its own technical language? For example, a ballerina might know that a 'grand jeté' means a big leap, and a 'pirouette' is a turn. Write a list of technical terms used in your hobby and describe what they mean for someone who knows nothing about your hobby.
- On page 142, Thea and Mattias find a door to another world. Write a short story in which you find

a door to another world. Write about the incredible things you find there.

- On page 153, Thea has her first experience of the night sky. Pretend it is your first time doing so, and go outside and describe everything you hear and see and smell. Do this at night if possible. Write a poem about all the things your senses pick up.
- Write a poem describing a sunrise.
- Thea eats chocolate for the first time on page 182. Write a short piece describing chocolate to someone who hasn't eaten it before.
- Peter decides he is going to go with Thea to Gracehope, even though he has the opportunity to go back to his family. Has there been a moment in your life where you have had to make a tough decision like this? Write about your memory of this time.
- Thea finds out that Dexna has only been pretending to be mute. Thinking creatively, make a list of ten reasons a person might pretend to not be able to speak. Pick one of them to explore in more detail in a short story.
- Peter wonders if he has just been to a place that nobody else knows about. Do you have a special place you like to go that nobody knows about? Write a descriptive piece about this place or draw a picture of it.
- Do you believe there are places on our earth that nobody else knows about? Where do you think this place would be? Write a story about a place nobody else has discovered.
- Write a story about something that is mysterious to you. It could be ghosts, religion, something scientific, or even love!
- Thea almost doesn't recognise Lucian away from the archives. Have you ever seen someone in a different place from where you usually see them and been surprised at how different they are? Write a short story about encountering someone familiar to you outside of their 'natural habitat'. The person could be your librarian, your doctor, the boy who serves you in the supermarket, or anybody else of your choosing!
- There is much talk of light and darkness in this book. What do they represent to you? Write a poem about light and darkness.
- If you could have one superpower, what would it be? Write a short story about yourself as a superhero. Give yourself a superhero name and a costume!
- On page 319, Peter says his heart now lives in two places. Do you have a place where your heart is? Write a poem about it.
- Do you like the ending of this book? What would you have happening differently? Write an alternative ending.

Debate topics

- What do you think of the two alternating perspectives in *First Light*? Have you ever read another book that's done this? Did you enjoy reading from one character's point of view more than the other's? Give reasons for your choice.
- Global warming does not exist
- The world would be a better place if paper was no longer used.
- It is never possible to know everything about someone.
- In the future, people won't know how to handwrite.
- It is possible to predict the future.
- Children and teenagers should do jobs to earn privileges.
- There are some foods the human body can't function without.
- The internet is a good place to find information you can trust.
- 'There is something very good about work when your mind is in a state of confusion.'
- Peter should have turned back when he had the chance.
- Rowen was justified in lying about there being a route to the surface.
- Rowen was justified in sending Mai to the surface when she got sick.

Essay topics

- What are your first impressions of Rowen? Write a short paragraph about what you have picked up about her character so far.
- On page 51, we find out that, 'If Thea didn't meet her hours before the end of the cycle, she would lose her common privileges—her license to use the Mainway, the few "luxury" rations with which she could barter for sweets or trinkets, and her reading rights at the archive, among other things.' Do you think that a system where teenagers work a certain number of hours in exchange for privileges is a good thing? Give reasons for your answers. Do you have to do jobs in your family to earn privileges?
- On page 57 we find out that 'The women of Gracehope weren't allowed to bear the children of whomever they chose.' Instead, their choice of 'mate' is made for them by a person called 'The Angus'. If there was a person in your town who could tell you the perfect person for you to marry, and you had to marry that person, would you be happy with this? Do you believe that arranged marriages are a good idea? Why or why not? Give reasons for your answers.
- Fathers do not play a big role in the upbringing of their children in Thea's land. Do you think this is a good or bad thing? Do children need a father to be

raised in the best way possible? Give reasons for your answers.

- Peter believes in the 'Second Volkswagen Road' because he read about it on the internet. Do you believe everything you read on the internet? Why or why not?
- Have you had any bad experiences with the internet? How do you know if you can trust something you read on the internet? Give reasons for your answers.
- Peter risks his life to save the dogs. Do you think this act was heroic or irresponsible? Give reasons for your answer.
- If your pets were in danger would you risk your life to save them? Do you believe a human life is worth more than an animal one? Give reasons for your answers.
- When Thea needs information, she goes straight to the archives.(p.104) Where is the first place you go for information? Give reasons for your answer.
- On page 118, Jonas tells of the suffering of the orphans in his community and how they grew up to be strong, successful people. Do you think going through hardship makes people stronger? Use examples from your own experience, and the experiences of people you have read about or seen in documentaries or movies.
- Have a think about the mural Thea and Mattias find in the passageway (p.144)—the one with babies and old people. If it doesn't depict the settlers, who do you think it does depict? Give reasons for your answer.
- Rory says, 'Find it for me, Gregory.' (p.144) What do you think she wants Peter's dad to find? Think of some reasons why she might want this place or object to be found.
- Why do you think the people of Gracehope call families 'lines'? Is their concept of family different from the concept of family we have in Australia? How do you think it differs? Give reasons for your answers.
- There are many lies in this book. Is there ever an excuse for lying? Back your opinion up with examples from your own life, or from historical events you may have read about.
- What is the most interesting scientific discovery you have heard about? It could be a discovery from long ago history, or one you have seen on the news recently. Write a report about it, and give reasons for why you think this discovery is so clever and important.
- Do you think it's okay to wear fur if the animal dies naturally? Would you do it? Why or why not?
- What information would you convey to someone who had never been in the wider world? What would be the most important things someone

might need to know about the world today? Give reasons for your answers.

- Can you think of any events we celebrate in our world that are reminders of unpleasant historical events, or events that had good and bad aspects? Write about one of these celebrations.
- Do you believe the things politicians tell you? Why do you think politicians might lie?
- Is there a profession in society you believe to be the most trustworthy? What about one that is the most untrustworthy? Give reasons for your choices.
- The people of Gracehope believe the runt puppy is a 'sign'. Do you believe in 'signs'? Why or why not?
- Do you think people would do more about global warming if they knew a place like Gracehope existed? Give reasons for your answer.

Research activities

- Peter's father is a glaciologist. What does a glaciologist do? Write a report on the profession.
- Peter's father researches global warming. What do you know about global warming? Find some news articles that have been published recently about global warming. Do they all agree? Is there one article that you think is right? Why do you believe this?
- Peter's dad tells him that, 'a philanthropist is someone who gives away a lot of his own money.'(p.9) Find the dictionary definition of philanthropist and then do some research on the internet about philanthropists. Choose one famous philanthropist and write a report on them.
- Peter's dad announces he is going to Greenland on page 9. Do some research into Greenland. Why does it have this name? Find out where it is in the world, what its capital is, and what its highest and lowest temperatures are. Find out some interesting facts about the country. Once you have completed your research, produce a report based on your findings.
- Peter's mum is a 'molecular biologist'. Do some research into what molecular biology is and write a report explaining your findings.
- Jonas is an Inuit. What is an Inuit? Do some research and write a report on your findings.
- It seems like Peter's dream has predicted the future of the little boy who cut his hair. Do you believe in fortune telling? Do some research into different kinds of fortune telling, such as tarot cards, runes and reading tea leaves. Pick one to write a detailed report on. After you have conducted your research, has your opinion on fortune telling changed?
- Many people believe that dreams have hidden meanings. Do you have a dream you can remember? See if you can find out what its hidden meaning is.

- The flags in the council building 'symbolised the Settlers' bloody escape from the old world.' (p.39) Do some research into the Australian flag. What do the separate parts of the flag symbolise? Are there some people who wish our flag to be changed? Do some research into the 'flag debate' and incorporate this into your report.
- What is the 'horizon'? (p.46) Do some research and then write a short piece explaining it to someone who has never seen it.
- Peter and his family go to live near a place called Qaanaaq. Do some research into Qaanaaq—where it is located, how many people live there, what its climate is like, if it is famous for anything, and any other facts you would like to incorporate—and write a short report about it.
- Thea has a lump of ambergris she likes to squeeze in her hand. Do some research about ambergris. Where does it come from and what is it used for?
- A 'lightslate' sounds a bit like an eReader or an iPad. Do some research about eReaders. You might find that there is some debate over whether eReaders are better than paper books, and the impact they will have on book publishing. After you have completed your research, make a decision about whether eReaders are a positive technological development.
- Do some research into the musk oxen and the Arctic fox. Find pictures of them and create a collage using these pictures and facts you have discovered about the creatures.
- The fluttering in Peter's head sounds very much like a symptom of a migraine. Research migraines. What are they and what causes them? What are the symptoms? Why do some people get them and not others? Is there treatment or a cure? Write a report based on your findings.
- Peter's mother gives him a present of some chocolate 'spring' eggs from his favourite lolly shop in New York. (p.112) Chocolate eggs are often given as presents at Easter (which is in Spring in the Northern Hemisphere). Why do people give eggs as presents at Easter? What do they symbolise? Have eggs always been given as Easter presents? Research the history of egg-giving and think about what the eggs might symbolise in *First Light*.
- Peter says that chocolate is poison to dogs. Is this true? See if you can find out and, if so, why is it poisonous? Are there any other foodstuffs that are poisonous to dogs?
- On page 115, Peter encounters a polar bear. Do some research into polar bears. Find out five interesting facts about them and make a poster using this information.
- On page 117, Peter and Jonas build an igloo. Do some research into igloos. How do the Inuit stay warm inside them? How are they built and how long do they last?
- On page 134, Peter's mother explains mitochondrial DNA to Peter. What is something that you know a lot about, that many people don't? It could be a sport, a mathematical concept, an art form, an animal, or anything you like! Try and explain it in 'layman's' language, to someone who knows nothing about it.
- What is a constellation? What are some of the most famous constellations? Pick one constellation to research and write a report on it. When was it discovered and who by? How many stars make it up? Does it have a nickname?
- Would you know what to do if you were first on the scene to help someone who had an accident, like the one Mattias has? Do some research into the best thing to do to help someone who is unconscious.
- On page 169, Thea says that it had never occurred to her that hair might come in different colours. Do some research into hair colour. Why is it that hair comes in so many different colours? Write a report based on your findings.
- Thea tells Peter that her 'lightglobe' is fuelled by oxygen instead of electricity. (p.189) Do some research into alternative power sources, such as wind power and solar power. Pick one to write a report on, discussing the pros and cons of this kind of power.
- On page 193, Lucian tells Peter, 'Our people were from England, originally. So were our pursuers: We fled to the cold world—to the place you know on the surface.' Do some research into the concept of 'persecution'. Choose one persecuted group of people to do further research on and write a report about.
- The story that Lana tells on page 216 is called an allegory. What is an allegory? Find another example of a famous allegory and explain its meaning, or see if you can write one of your own.
- Do some research into the persecution of witches in history. Write a report based on your findings.