



ACCIDENTAL TOURIST

Ordinary wolves

Shani Raviv bumps into a published polar person while rambling round a bookstore

I met a man in a bookstore who lived in an igloo. He was a short, unassuming man in ordinary clothes — maybe corduroy pants or jeans and a heavy navy blue jacket. He looked the part of a lost savant. He was standing there politely soliciting the person in charge to find a book.

Unfortunately detailed memories of such encounters are as vague as last week's dreams. But I remember this man explaining that he was the author of a book which he hoped to find and autograph. He was on a book-signing tour in the States and New York City was his last stop.

He was gatecrashing as many Barnes and Nobles bookstores as he could; perhaps in the hope of finding his precious thoughts adorned in ink, wearing designer jackets and posing in the front window. Maybe it was in pursuit of making one last mark on his intellectual property before releasing it into the hands that grind. Or maybe he just wished to bottle the elusiveness of acclaim.

I followed him to find his book. But he didn't. The person in charge said it was either sold out or had never arrived. So we went upstairs instead for bottled water and a marooned conversation. The kind you only find in a metropolis. The kind where the words are fleeting, but the gist everlasting.

It's that one-off opportunity to meet somebody and exchange fractures of feelings in limited time. It's like marriage. Only in these meetings you may never see the person again.

Seth was from Northwest Alaska. He drew a map for me in black ink on a white serviette. He told me that for most of his childhood he had never left the ice; he had never seen a city. He had grown up among Eskimos in sod igloos.

He fished, photographed, built ice homes, left, returned and now lives there with his wife and daughter, I think her name was China.

Illustration: PIET GROBLER



I told him I live near the southern most tip of Africa.

He said, "Exotic!"

We talked apartheid and ice and sunshine and loneliness.

We were two strangers from polar worlds enticed by the allure of the greener grass, the cooler ice, the warmer sun.

Seth wanted to sign some books so we left the bookstore and stepped out into the piercing summer shine. He said he had one hour to kill before needing to be back in his hotel room to pack and return to Alaska so he could see China.

He told me this was his first time in NYC and that he was only around for the day. I asked him if there were one thing he'd like to do in his last hour what it would be. I suggested New York's big gap, famous statue, highest structure or longest bridge.

But he said he would rather sign books. So we went to a nearby Barnes and Nobles. He told the person in charge that he was the author of *Ordinary Wolves* — which took him 12 years to write and sold 12 000 copies — and that he wanted to sign his books. The person in charge didn't seem to give a shit but led us to a long row with stacks of white covers. On each cover

was a blue negative of a wolf's jaw barking at the words Seth Kantner written in vertical bold orange letters.

Seth took out a ballpoint pen and conscientiously signed every copy he could see; and I stood there thinking that this is what it must be like to watch a published author in action. Autographing. And although I felt lucky, I felt removed — like I was the short stick of someone else's glory.

But then again it's not every day you get to experience the publishing business in The United States of America from a man who learnt to survive this wild life from the wolves.