Genuine Eskimo Literature; accept no substitutes

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In July of 1745, Eskimo literature as a written form made its first auspicious appearance under the watchful eye of Dr. Samuel Johnson. As virtual editor of *The gentleman's magazine,* Johnson published a "Greenland Ode," an Eskimo language poem with an interlinear English translation, celebrating King Christian of Denmark's birthday. Johnson's insistence on bilingual publication was firmly based on his belief that to understand a man you must know something of his language, and this scrupulous treatment of the poem was an excellent start to the tradition of Eskimo literature in English.

Unfortunately, Johnson's successors have not always been as concerned about preserving the authenticity of Eskimo literature as he was, and modern editors frequently fail to draw a distinction between literature *about* Eskimos and literature *by* Eskimos. The myths and legends, by far the most visible elements of Canadian Inuit literature, have suffered particularly in this regard, primarily because they have been critically assessed as children's literature. Under the guise of "adapting" and "improving" the material to make it more palatable to young people, editors have twisted and mutilated Eskimo stories so that they often more closely resemble European fairy tales than aboriginal creation tales.

Canadian writers who find themselves out of harmony with their European roots often turn to Native Canadian culture to try and develop a synthesis out of the two displaced cultures. When this garrison/forest synthesis is successful, as in James Houston's work, both cultures benefit. Houston manages to preserve the anthropological accuracy of detail in stories such as *Tikta'liktak,* although he changes the legends and imposes a European crisis/resolution structure on them. Houston's stories are presented as his own creations and as such they are so popular with children in the north that several of them are currently being prepared for publication in Inuktitut. Houston is the exception, though; more often, supposedly "Eskimo" stories lack not only the mythic impact of authentic Inuit stories but also the structures and moral conclusions of the European tradition.

Herbert Schwarz claims in *Elik and other stories of the MacKenzie Eskimos* that he "spent four months in the western Arctic collecting authentic Eskimo tales for Elik";[1] at the same time he admits that he speaks no Inuktitut, never uses a tape recorder because "it only makes them shy and self-concious,"[2] and

apparently often dispensed with the services of an interpreter as well. He even (incorrectly) spells Mackenzie with a capital K, which speaks volumes about his work. It isn't necessary for all writers using Native Canadian material to be strict purists, but if stories are to be touted as Eskimo, they should have some solid, demonstrable link with the genuine articles.

As Muriel Whitaker points out, there is a great deal to attract children in the legendary material; the tales are simple, the situations frequently comic, and the animals in them are endowed with human powers in a way that appeals to the young imagination. However, Whitaker goes on to judge important segments of Eskimo mythology as unsuitable for non-Native or acculturated Native children because of the inclusion of elements that are sexual, scatalogical or frightening. "Many of the Eskimo tales," she says, "seem to embody a dubious morality, for mere survival takes precedence over all other considerations."[3] She explains in "Monsters From Native Canadian Mythologies" that:

> When Inuit mythology takes literary form, certain adaptations are required, aside from those related to problems of translation. For non-Inuit readers, the mythic characters must be set in a realizable physical and social world, a sequence of cause and effect must be established, and if the retellings are intended for children, the nightmare elements and sexual allusions must be softened.[4]

Whitaker's approach to Eskimo mythology suggests that bowdlerizing Native stories is a good thing, that adaptors such as Melzack, Schwarz, and Houston are performing a valuable service for Canadian children. Such a position encourages editors to have a dangerously casual attitude to the function of the material they are handling. Monsters exist in the minds and under the beds of all small children and many large adults, sex and scatology are fascinating subjects, children will always be afraid of the dark, and survival will never be "mere" survival in a country such as this one.

It is ironic that monsters, sex, and violence are routinely being expurgated from Inuit legends by modern publishers just at a time when they are being restored to the tales of the Brothers Grimm and lauded in the works of Maurice Sendak. Traditionally, Inuit did not distinguish between adults' literature and children's literature; stories and songs were transmitted orally and material that was unsuitable for young ears, if such material indeed existed, was generally considered to be too complex or even too boring to attract the attention of children. Each song or legend worked simultaneously on different levels and children appreciated the action of the work, and the accompanying string games or facemaking, while adults appreciated the reflections on religious thinking or the subtle sexual humor. The mythic monsters that emerged were an expression of man's concept of evil, and by confronting evil in imagination both children and adults were afforded a means of allaying their fears. The "blood and guts" found in Native myths fulfilled a deep basic need, and this impor-

tant function is frustrated when non-Native editors give the monsters the "gently smiling jaws" that Whitaker suggests.

Fortunately, in recent years, Inuit and non-Inuit have worked to produce some Eskimo stories which, even in English, are true to the fundamental spirit of the old mythmakers and storytellers, and there are monsters enough in them to fill even this huge country. It is now possible to reject the legends laundered by people in the south and to put volumes of genuine Inuit myths and legends into the hands of readers of all ages. These stories have the authority of those found in anthropological works such as Boas's *The central Eskimo,* Jenness's *Report of the Canadian Arctic expedition 1913-18* and Rasmussen's *Report of the fifth thule expedition 1921-24,* but organization, design and illustration make them much more appealing than these earlier great volumes.

Anthropologists had been collecting, transcribing, and translating Inuit myths and legends for several decades by the time Eugene Arima and Zebedee Nungak published *Eskimo stories from Povungnituk, Quebec* in 1969, but this work was unique since it appealed to the general reader while retaining the authenticity of the stories. Arima, an anthropologist, and Nungak, his translator, published their work as a National Museums of Canada Bulletin similar to Jenness's *Corn goddess.* The stories themselves were mostly written in syllabics and were intended to explain the meaning of a number of soapstone carvings brought in to the Sculptors' Society of Povungnituk at the request of Asen Balikci. What distinguished *Eskimo stories* from *The corn goddess* was that there were two editions of the book, one in English and in Roman orthography Inuktitut, and the other in French and in syllabic Inuktitut. The illustrations are photographs of the carvings which provided the original incentive for writing the stories down, and Arima's appendix, based on Rasmussen's work, provides a review of Central Eskimo mythology and illuminates the texts without being obtrusive. Zebedee Nungak was, incredibly, only twelve years old when he began work on the stories, but he has since gone on to edit a number of Eskimo periodicals. *Eskimo stories* has a large, attractive format and, after many reprints, is still one of the best (and cheapest) works of Eskimo literature available in Canada.

Perhaps it was the success of *Eskimo stories* which encouraged a commercial publisher to risk publishing Inuit legends instead of retold versions, for in 1972 Maurice Metayer's *Tales from the igloo* appeared. Agnes Nanogak's beautiful colour plates certainly made the most of the developing public appetite for Eskimo art, but it is the stories, full of skeleton wives and bear-men, magic animals and cruel mothers, ghosts and ogres, which make *Tales from the igloo* so attractive to children. As Al Purdy points out in the foreword, the tales clarify the reality of the Arctic as it existed and as it exists; "If you turn this book at just the right angle of vision and belief, you may catch a glimpse of that world." The stories, contributed by six Coppermine residents, are in a fragmented form, an accurate reflection of the nature of an oral literature which has had to travel all the way from Siberia to Greenland. But this fragmentation

doesn't seem to be a drawback.

More of the legends Father Metayer collected appeared after his death, edited by Leonie Kappi in a volume called simply *Inuit legends.* Germaine Arnaktoyok provided the illustrations for this bilingual English/Inuktitut book. Arnaktoyok had previously illustrated *Stories from Pangnirtung* which, like Armand Tagoona's *Shadows,* is not simply a bare collection of stories but a series of reminiscences which included stories. Myths tend to be anonymous and provide a cosmic view of life, but these works, along with Peter Pitseolak's *People from our side* and Dorothy Eber's *Pitseolak: pictures out of my life,* tend to integrate the stories into an historic or personal context. The legends often have some basis in fact and frequently the storytellers describe the situations in which they heard the stories.

Dozens of volumes of Inuit stories have been produced by northern school boards, cultural institutes, and religious organizations, but they are more difficult to find than the commercial publications mentioned. Two works which do occasionally turn up in libraries and book stores are *Eskimo songs and stories,* edited by Edward Field from the Rasmussen collection, and *How Kabloonat became and other Inuit legends,* edited by Mark Kalluak. Kalluak originally published many of the stories in *Kabloonat* in his paper *The Keewatin echo,* and while his illustrations are not as colourful as Agnes Nanogak's nor as sophisticated as Germaine Arnaktoyok's, they give unity and charm to the book. His monstrous Mahaha, who tickles people to death, has smiling jaws which are anything but gentle.

Diaries and autobiographies constitute an important segment of written Inuit literature, partly because newly literate writers find their own lives the easiest subject to attempt, and partly because Inuit have received a great deal of encouragement from outsiders to work in this direction. Most older Inuit got what little formal education they received from missionaries and one of the tasks these teachers frequently set their adult students was to write out their life stories. The keeping of diaries was also encouraged, and church representatives often provided notebooks for that purpose. Government agents, anthropologists, and art collectors have displayed an insatiable appetite for Eskimo reminiscences, and a surprising number of the resulting memoirs have found their way into print. These memoirs, whether they originate in English or Inuktitut, tend to have a plain style and an episodic structure which makes them suitable for older children.

The earliest extant diary is that written by a Labrador Inuk, Abraham, in 1880. However, the first to be published was Lydia Campbell's *Sketches of Labrador life* which first appeared in the St. John's, Newfoundland *Evening telegram* in 1894, and was reprinted in a 32 page booklet in 1980. Mrs. Campbell, a 75-year-old "Livyere" of mixed blood, was given an exercise book by the Reverend Arthur C. Waghorne, who begged her to write him some account

of Labrador life and ways. On Christmas Day, 1893, after walking four miles through waist-high snow drifts to check her rabbit snares in thirty-below-zero weather, the old woman sat down to comply with his request. She recorded how she killed her first deer when she was a young woman, and notes that, except for her only surviving child and his motherless children, no other people live near her and her husband:

> None near us but them and our dear children's graves. We can see their headstones at a distance over on the cranberry banks, so pretty it looks in the fall when we come home from our summer quarters.

Old Mrs. Campbell's great grand-niece, Elizabeth Goudie, also took to writing in exercise books in her old age and the resulting *Woman of Labrador* makes an interesting companion piece to *Sketches of Labrador life.*

Autobiographies by men such as John Ayaruaq and Bernard Irquqaqtuq are, unfortunately, not easily available to English readers, but Maurice Metayer's translation of Bob Cockney's autobiography, *I, Nuligak,* is still available in a paperback edition. Nuligak grew up in the Western Arctic where syllabics are not used, so he was able to use an ordinary typewriter to record his memoirs while recovering from an illness. Reviewers were quick to note the inherent drama and tragedy in his story, the lack of sentimentality, and the thread of conceit and vanity that gives the work an authenticity lacking in so many fictional accounts of Inuit life. The structure of the work, which appears initially to be rather loose or fragmented, follows the regular pattern of the seasons and years, and imposes a characteristically Eskimo flavour to the book.

I, Nuligak is something of a "Pilgrim's Progress" of the western Arctic, but *Thrasher: skid row Eskimo* is more of a "Rake's Progress," and adults should exercise a certain amount of discretion in directing the attention of young people towards this work. The author's recollections of life in a Roman Catholic boarding school in Aklavik are lively and amusing, and his account of the prison riots of the 1960s in Prince Albert Penitentiary, where he was serving a sentence for killing a man in a Calgary bar, is particularly vivid and gripping. However, the author recalls drunken sprees with obvious relish, makes some dreadfully racist remarks about black people and Indians, and shows little inclination to take responsibility for his anti- social behavior. The really poignant moments come in the passages where Thrasher is not really trying to amuse or impress; in recalling a journey made with his father when he was fourteen, Thrasher tells of how they spent a night with the Cockneys. The picture of this hard bitten young Inuk taking part in a traditional Eskimo drum dance under the patrician eye of Nuligak is charged with irony. How different things might have been!

Three other Eskimo autobiographies have something to offer older children. Alice French's *My name is Masak* is aimed at young people and is an infor-

mative and lyrical account of life on the Mackenzie Delta in the years prior to the Second World War. *Pitseolak: pictures out of my life* is an oral biography by Dorothy Eber and has the advantage of being a bilingual English/Inuktitut publication with lavish illustrations in both colour and black and white. Peter Pitseolak's *People from our side* is a very personal history of the Cape Dorset area and contains photographs of events of historic significance: the sinking of the ship *Nascopie,* which marks the beginning of the modern era in the Arctic, and the introduction of plastic igloos to Cape Dorset. For younger children, there are English language versions of *Peter Pitseolak's Escape from death,* beautifully illustrated by the author, and Norman Eekoomiak's *An Arctic childhood,* an English/Inuktitut syllabic edition which has colour and black and white illustrations.

Ever since the 1930s when Knud Rasmussen, Alfred B. Lord and others brought Eskimo poetry to the attention of people outside the field of anthropology, Inuit song has received considerable attention, but it has rarely been considered particularly appropriate for children. This is an unfortunate oversight, for the simplicity of expression evident in most Eskimo literature works to particular advantage in the poetry. Tone, diction, and subject matter all combine in a deceptively simple manner to present striking images and brief moments of deep emotion which are often surprisingly universal and quite comprehensible to young readers. Traditional Eskimo songs can generally be categorized into four groups: songs of mood or reflection, hunting songs, charms and incantations, and satiric and didactic or derisive songs. With the possible exception of some works in the last category, these poems act to draw children into the world of the Inuit and to elicit from them responses that reaffirm the universal nature of the human condition.

Two collections of Inuit poetry suitable for even very young children do exist: James Houston's *Songs of the dream people: chants and images from the Indians and Eskimos of North Amermica* and Charles Hofmann's *Drum dance: legends, ceremonies, dances and songs of the Eskimos.* The twenty one Eskimo poems in Houston's collection include the works of Alaskan, Canadian, and Greenlandic Eskimos and are simply and effectively illustrated by the editor's drawings of Eskimo carvings and artifacts. Hofmann's *Drum dance* provides a context for the poems and, like Richard Lewis's excellent *I breathe a new song,* contains contemporary materials as well as traditional. Hofmann's illustrations include such diverse elements as Canadian stamps, historic etchings, diagrams of dance houses, and stills from films, but the format and presentation are not in the least intimidating. Houston's book serves to emphasize the universal qualities of Eskimo poetry, while Hofmann's tends to draw the reader into the culture in which the poetry originated.

For older children, John Robert Colombo's *Poems of the Inuit* combines both these qualities. The songs are presented in the main body of the book without explanatory additions, but a comprehensive preface and introduction provide

an excellent overview of Canadian Eskimo songs. The copious and erudite notes at the back give annotative information about specific selections. Included in this book are eight full-page photographs from the works of Robert Flaherty, and a comprehensive list of related books, articles and films, all of which combine to make this one of the most popular and academically sound collections of Eskimo poetry to date.

Several other books deserve the attention of children and those who teach them: Markoosie's novel *Harpoon of the hunter* is a classic known around the world in eighteen different languages; Robin Gedalof's *Paper stays put: a collection of Inuit writing* presents a wide variety of poems, stories and memoirs by modern Canadian Eskimo writers, including Minnie Freeman's play "Survival in the South," which has never been published elsewhere; *Singing songs to the spirit,* published by Canada Post, is a delightful addition to the corpus. First rate material can also be found in back volumes of *The Canadian children's annual* and in art catalogues from museums across the country. Besides the works specifically mentioned here,[5] there are hundreds of other works by Inuit writers available to the discerning reader. Buyers should be as concerned about authenticity when they are purchasing Eskimo literature as they are when shopping for soapstone carvings or Cape Dorset prints. A little discretion in this area can be greatly rewarding to the reader and will certainly serve to enhance the reputations of Eskimo authors in this country.

NOTES

[1]Herbert Schwarz, *Elik and other stories of the MacKenzie Eskimos* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1970), p. 79.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 76.

[3]Muriel Whitaker, "Canadian Indian and Eskimo legends as children's literature," in Gote Klingberg, Mary Rvig, Stuart Amor, eds. *Children's books in translation: the situation and the problems* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977), p. 165.

[4]Muriel Whitaker, "Monsters from Native Canadian mythologies," *Canadian children's literature,* 15/16 (1980), p.58.

[5]Full bibliographical details on these works and others can be found in Robin Gedalof's *An annotated bibliography of Canadian Inuit literature* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1979).

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