

## NORTHERN CHILDREN

*Salik and his father, Salik and the big ship, Salik and the summer of the song duel, Salik and Arnaluk*, Catherine Maggs and Keld Hansen. Illus. Keld Hansen. Breakwater Books, 1981. 32 pp. paper \$4.95. ISBN 0-919948-94-4, 0-919948-83-9, 0-919948-79-0, 0-919948-78-2; *Children of the Yukon*, Ted Harrison. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1983. 26 pp. cloth, paper \$10.95, 6.95. ISBN 0-88776-133-X, 0-88776-163-1; *Mary of Mile 18*, Ann Blades. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1971 reprint 1983. unpaginated \$7.95. ISBN 0-88776-059-7.

Many southerners still have a mental picture of the north as a desolate wasteland of ice and snow populated by smiling Eskimos who live in igloos and drive dog teams. In the past, children's books in particular have done little to change this image. However, the northern children's books published by Breakwater Books and Tundra Books give a far more realistic and appealing picture of both the old north and the north as it is today. While the "Salik" series portrays traditional Eskimo life, *Children of the Yukon* depicts life in Indian villages of the Yukon, and *Mary of Mile 18* describes a day in the life of a white northern family, all these books show the north as an exciting and beautiful place to live — in spite of the often harsh conditions. The children in each story experience emotions familiar to children the world over.

The Salik series consists of four paperback books translated from the original Danish in 1981. They describe the life of Salik, an Eskimo boy, and his family, who lived in Greenland three hundred years ago. Although the stories are set in Greenland, the lifestyle is very similar to that of the Canadian Eskimos living at the same time. The four stories follow the cycle of the seasons, describing the migration patterns and day-to-day existence of Salik's family in their search for food, clothing and shelter. The books also describe the chronological development of Salik, as he changes from a twelve-year-old boy, living in his father's house, into a young man of twenty-two with a wife and home of his own. Each story presents a problem or series of difficulties to be overcome by Salik and his family, thus providing suspense. The stories provide a wealth of information about the traditional Eskimo way of life and their old religious beliefs. Notes in the back of each book help to clarify unfamiliar terms and practices.

Similar in style to the Eskimo prints produced in the Arctic today, Keld Hansen's illustrations help to clarify the activities and clearly portray unfamiliar tools and equipment. The attractive earth colours demonstrate beautifully the appearances of the Arctic countryside in all seasons. Maps are also included to show the various journeys taken by Salik and his family as they hunt for food.

Although most of today's Eskimos live in permanent towns and villages with the modern conveniences of the white world, many of the activities depicted

in the Salik series are still familiar; e.g., ice fishing, hunting whales, moose or caribou, tanning hides and making mukluks and parkas. The old religion of magic and spirits is no longer followed, but children are still exposed to the traditional singing, dancing and drumming at social gatherings. Stories about the old days are still told by the elders. *Salik and the big ship* describes Salik's first contact with white men, including interesting descriptions of how the Eskimos perceived these strange men "with skin the colour of snow" and their amazing technology.

The Salik series is both educational and entertaining, providing a clear picture of traditional Eskimo life. It would be excellent for classroom use in both northern and southern schools.

Ted Harrison, author of *Children of the Yukon*, has painted and taught in the Yukon for many years. His familiarity with northern people and their way of life and his personal knowledge and love of the north are apparent in this beautifully illustrated book.

*Children of the Yukon* is a collection of some of Mr. Harrison's oil paintings depicting Yukon village life. The vivid images appeal to children and adults alike. The brilliant colours of Mr. Harrison's art attract even very young children who see nothing incongruous about pink snow or a blue moose. While Harrison's use of colour is unusual, his subject matter is realistic, depicting scenes and activities familiar to most northerners as well as many southern Canadians; for example, ice fishing, hunting rabbits and moose, or having a snowshoe race. Other pictures have universal appeal; for example, racing with the horses, the fear of a house fire, or getting ready for the first canoe ride in the springtime. Harrison's close attention to details exhibits an intimate knowledge of his subject matter. Anyone who has lived in the Yukon or other parts of the north will instantly recognize the way the chimney smoke goes straight up on a very cold day, the ravens teasing the skinny village dogs and the posture of the people as they trudge through the snow on a cold winter evening. There is plenty of action; the people and animals come alive.

Harrison provides a short text with each of his paintings. Although the pictures are self-explanatory and can be enjoyed by all ages, the text does complement each painting and provides interesting factual information about the Yukon's history and people. This book, along with Ted Harrison's *A northern alphabet*, should be in every school library.

Ann Blades, author of *Mary of Mile 18*, is also writing from personal experience. In 1967, she taught school in the northern British Columbia community of Mile 18 on the Alaska Highway. This personal knowledge adds credibility. When I read this story to my Grade 2 class, they were very interested in the fact that Mile 18 was a real community and Mary might be a real girl. They wanted to know if they could drive from Inuvik to Mile 18, and were very excited when I showed them the route they would have to take. We had long discussions about Mary's way of life as it compared to their own northern experiences.

*Mary of Mile 18* describes one day in the life of Mary Fehr and her family who have come north to farm in the British Columbia wilderness. At the beginning of the story, suspense is provided by Mary's feeling that something special will happen that day. Later, the problem of the wolf pup keeps children reading to find out what will happen next. A coyote in the hen house provides additional excitement.

This book gives a vivid description of the day-to-day life of a modern pioneer family. Blades' close attention to small details — such as the way the children dress, and the plumbing and heating systems in a house with wood-burning stoves and no running water — makes the story realistic. The vocabulary and sentence structure are suitable for readers between the ages of 6 and 10. However, even small children can understand Mary's desire for a puppy of her own and her feelings of disappointment and injustice when her father refuses to let her keep the wolf pup. The ultimate happy ending always pleases children.

Ann Blades' simple, colourful illustrations complement her text. They realistically portray a winter day in northern B.C. including icicles, northern lights and frosty forests. The wood heater made from an oil barrel and the outhouse in Mary's yard are authentic touches.

The descriptions of Mary's life contain many elements familiar to northern children, many of whom still go to bush camps in the spring and summer, where wood must be cut and buckets of water carried. They know what it's like to wear many layers of clothing, and tie "scarves over their heads and across their faces to protect them from the cold." Children who live in regions where the temperature falls below minus 40° for weeks at a time can easily imagine Mary's physical discomfort when walking home from the Bergen farm:

"As she runs home in the cold night her toes and fingertips sting and the air burns her throat."

Blades' attention to detail in both text and illustration, and her understanding of Mary's feelings make the book believable for primary school children. While the story has a northern setting, Mary's dreams and desires are universal.

All three authors exhibit a first-hand knowledge of the northern environment and the lifestyles of the people who live there. They portray the north as a colourful, exciting place to live and clearly describe various aspects of man's adaptation to this harsh but beautiful land.

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