
Reviewed by John Holmes McDowell.

This little book is chock-full of useful information: you can learn in it how to build an igloo (for example, using loose snow rather than ice chunks makes for a warmer result); how to hunt a seal (the details are a bit gory here); and how to stay oriented in a flat landscape (perhaps I should say *snowscape*) by attending to currents of wind and water.

Most importantly, perhaps, there are useful ideas about how to deceive your enemies: give them the gift of mittens to make their hands useless in self-defense; or, make a slick surface in your igloo by pouring water on the floor – but be sure to have crampons made of caribou antlers on hand, for yourself, and if possible, a club made from caribou antlers, for use as your enemies slip about helplessly.

Michael Evans has gifted us with a charming book that contains this kind of information and much, much more. He has written an eloquent evocation of survival, and more than that, of the good life, as practiced over the centuries and into the present by the Inuit people in what used to be the Northwest Territories of Canada, but became in 1999 the Nunavut Territory (Nunavut means “our land” in Inuktitut). As the title of the book intimates, this volume is in some sense a companion to the cinematic sensation, “Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner,” produced by a local crew based in Igloolik and released in 2001 to worldwide critical acclaim. And this book accomplishes this mission wondrously well. We meet and become acquainted with the key individuals who have formed Isuma, a video-production unit, as well as the core group of elders and everyday people who shape and populate the amazing productions coming out of Isuma. Especially memorable is our encounter with the brilliant and enigmatic Zacharias Kunuk, who as a young man dreamed of turning video into an instrument of cultural representation and has lived to realize that dream.

But beyond these worthy and well-served ambitions, this book holds special magic for the folklorist, and here I want to touch on two remarkable attributes: the close treatment of how an artist transforms a local legend into a compelling dramatic narrative, without losing track of its localized elements; and how a medium that is commonly thought to be an alienating tool of the modernist surge has been here harnessed to the needs and interests of a local community.

Michael Evans, good folklorist that he is, takes us through several variants of the Atanarjuat legend cycle, most of them gathered from oral tradition, but one of them documented in Knud Rasmussen’s 1929 *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. How can these raw materials be processed into a gripping cinematic production? What must be provided to flesh out the spare skeleton of oral narrative? Can the traditional ending be softened to convey a different moral? Michael Evans argues convincingly that the cinematic production emerging from Isuma’s craft is plausibly treated as this generation’s retelling of this classic tale.

For me the richest insight gained from my pleasant encounter with this book comes from looking in on a project of cultural reclamation inspired by the advent of media technology. Yes, these instruments of modernity – video cameras and studios, television, VCRs – normally thought to undermine local cultures,
in this instance foment a spirited recuperation of language, subsistence practices, and traditional modes of socialization, all in the effort to lend authenticity to “Atanarjuat” and Isuma’s other productions. In a pattern familiar from recuperation projects around the world, younger generations approach the elders for instruction in the ways of the past, but here, they do this in the pursuit of cinéma vérité, -- that is, to insure that the speech heard, the songs sung, the hunting techniques employed, and all else revealed in the movie be true and authentic to the Inuit historical experience.

Thank you, Michael Evans, in particular, for showing us that the word “authentic” can, in some contexts at least, be used by the scholar without ironic intent.

In closing, there is a profound suggestion advanced by the Isuma crew that the modern world might have something important to learn from the Inuits. With nations poised to stake their claims along the opening Northwest passage, Zacharias Kunuk is here to remind us that (in the words of Michael Evans) “Global warming is not caused by the Inuit, nor was the overharvesting of the ocean’s whales.” Moreover, “the Inuit have not organized an army, slashed plant life into submission, or depleted the world’s reserves of fossil fuels.” Michael Evans concludes: “Kunuk insists that the planet would benefit from the leadership and knowledge that the Inuit can bring to the table, and his films represent his argument to that effect” (126).

Isuma, it turns out, means “think!".