

Ten Exciting New Books Introduce the North, Inuit and Nunavut to Elementary School Children

Written by Nadine Fabbi, Assistant Director, Canadian Studies Center
Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington
For a hard copy of this essay, other background materials, or questions contact Nadine at:
206-543-6269 or nfabbi@u.washington.edu
Last Updated: March 2003

Elementary school teachers and librarians can successfully introduce children to Inuit culture and Northern/Nunavut history by having them read the ten selected books in this article and then enhancing these stories with additional curriculum and lesson plans. Children's literature from the North is relatively recent with all but one of the suggested books being published in the 1990s or 2000. All of the books are excellent in terms of quality (several are awards winners) and engaging for the young reader with beautiful illustrations. Each book also serves as an introduction to Inuit mythology, the history of the Northwest Passage and missionary schools, the importance of the inukshuk, and the vital place of the polar bear in Inuit culture. The entire "selection" can be purchased for under \$80.00 U.S. from Canadian bookstores and comprises a complete library of the Canadian North for children (see ordering information at the end of the article).

Beginning with Northern history, one of the most captivating historical events is that of the search for the Northwest Passage. While elementary school children may be too young to comprehend the 400-plus year race for the Passage and the vital role it played in opening the West to European "discovery" and settlement, they can certainly begin to imagine the fantasy of the Passage even at the kindergarten level. *Zoom Away* (1985) is an award-winning book by Canadian author Tim Wynne-Jones that brilliantly tells the story of the Northwest Passage through a child's eyes. For Zoom, the main character and a pussy cat, North is literally above him geographically speaking. Consequently, when Zoom and his human friend, Maria, decide to go North to search for the lost Franklin expedition, they head up a set of stairs to the top floor of a house. The further up the stairs they climb, the more snow there is and the colder it becomes.

Their search for the Northwest Passage leads them to a tiny door that opens into a long tunnel or the Passage itself. After walking down the tunnel Zoom can see the light at the other end and the world beyond. "Everywhere was ice, glistening and glaring in the bright sun ... "Yahoo!" he cried, "The North Pole."" And Zoom goes on to skate to his heart's content on a frozen lake. It is a magical story that younger children will take great delight in while it instills in their minds a sketch of a far more complex history that they can draw from in future social studies classes.

From this key event in Northern history to the Inuit – much of Inuit history and traditional culture can be taught through the works of Canada's most prolific and popular Inuk writer, Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak. Kusugak was born in the late 40s in today's Nunavut and lived a nomadic lifestyle with his family including traveling by dog sled and living in igloos in the winter months. Kusugak has written seven books to date all beautifully illustrated by Vladyana Kryorka a Czechoslovakian-Canadian artist. Kusugak's books are perfect for teaching about the culture and history of the North as each story depicts Michael's early memories of traditional life as well as the myths and tales his grandmother would tell him at bedtime.

A Promise is a Promise, Kusugak's first book co-written with Robert Munsch, is about the Qallupilluq (plural, Qallupilluit) an imaginary creature, somewhat like a troll, that lives in the Hudson's Bay or resides in icebergs. The Qallupilluit wear women's parkas made of loon

feathers, are grotesque looking and grab innocent children who come too near the shore or stand too close to cracks in the sea ice. The main character in the story is Allashua, a young Inuk girl, who disobeys her mother's warning not to fish on the sea ice. Sure enough, she is captured by the Qallupilluit and dragged down to the bottom of the ocean. Allashua barely escapes but must help her mother in tricking the sea monsters in order that she and her siblings are spared their lives.

A Promise is a Promise can be used to teach how the Inuit created stories that would assist in keeping their children safe particularly given that Inuit families traditionally spent a great deal of time on or near the sea. Once the children read and learn about the Qullupilluit, they can make up their own stories to keep one another from danger and have the experience of creating mythology for the purpose of survival as did the Inuit.

Kusugak's *Baseball Bats for Christmas* (1990), *Northern Lights the Soccer Trails* (1993) and *Arctic Stories* (1998) all illustrate aspects of Northern life. In *Baseball Bats for Christmas* the Inuit children, never having seen a tree, refer to them as "standing ups." When a pilot accidentally leaves a couple of Christmas trees at the Hudson's Bay store, the children chop them up and make baseball bats out of the trunks. This is a great way to teach children about the landscape and vegetation in the North and to introduce them to the concept of the treeline. The treeline is a transitional zone, a couple of miles in width, north of which trees no longer grow. The traditional homeland of the Inuit is north of the treeline and the homeland of First Nations or Indian people is south of that transitional zone. In fact the political boundary for the new territory of Nunavut, roughly follows the treeline. *Baseball Bats for Christmas* will give children a sense of what life in the Barrens actually looks like.

Northern Lights the Soccer Trails teaches children the important role of the northern lights in Inuit culture and how the mythology about the lights was used to comfort those who had lost someone dear. In the story a young girl, Kataujaq, remembers all of the wonderful things she used to do with her mother before her mother suffered from tuberculosis and died. Even as Kataujaq matures, she misses her mother and is, at times, terribly lonely. One night, when Kataujaq is feeling particularly sad, her grandmother tells her a story about the northern lights to comfort her. "People die ... and when they die, their souls leave their bodies and go up into the heavens, and there they live ... when they were on earth, they too like to play soccer. And, even though they no longer live among us, they still like to play. So, on a clear moonlit night ... you can see them, thousands of them, all running around chasing their soccer ball all over the sky." From then on, when Kataujaq sees the northern lights she also sees her mother in the sky, running around with the rest of the spirits playing soccer. This eases her loneliness. The story can be used to illustrate how myths are commonly used by all cultures to provide comfort and to make sense of the inexplicable. In addition, teachers can build on the story to teach the basic science of the northern lights and why it is that they are unique to the circumpolar regions.

Arctic Stories is a book of three stories about a young girl named Agatha. These stories tell of the first helium-filled aircraft that flew into the North and its impact on the Inuit; the importance of the raven in Northern life and; the residential school experience. The story about Agatha at the residential school is particularly important in introducing children to a key part of Inuit history. Certainly, almost all children will be able to relate to the fear, loneliness and discomfort of being in a new place for the first time. The Inuit were the last of the aboriginal peoples in North America to be sent to residential schools – it wasn't until the late 50s and early 60s that children were taken away for a year at a time to live with Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Kusugak was so unhappy during his first year at the residential school that when the plane came the following year to pick up the children, he hid in the hills and avoided being taken away. "Agatha Goes to School" is a gentle way to introduce children to a harsh history particularly as Kusugak uses much humor in the story

particularly in having the Priest, who is showing off his figure skating to the kids, fall into a hole in the ice.

An extremely vital part of Northern culture and one that is intriguing to children is the use of the inukshuk. Inukshuit (plural of inukshuk) are the rock formations that often resemble a human form. The word means, "thing that can act in place of a human." Inukshuit have been used for hundreds of years by the Inuit as directionals, caches for food, to warn of danger, etc. There is award-winning book on the inukshuk for children entitled, *The Inukshuk Book* (1999) by Mary Wallace. This book teaches children about the many meanings of the rock formations and comes with directions for building an inukshuk – a fun and simple class activity.

At the back of the book is a complete listing of the Inuktitut syllabics with the sounds next to the symbols. The alphabet is followed by a listing of common Inuktitut words. Because of the simple sounds indicated by each symbol, children can readily write out their name using the Inuktitut alphabet. In no time they will be able to write one another secret messages in Inuktitut – a game that children love and will effectively introduce them to the written language of the Inuit.

Returning to the symbol of the inukshuk, Kusugak has written a story that about the importance of the inukshuk to the Inuit. In *Hide and Sneak* (1992) the character from *A Promise is a Promise*, Allashua, spends the entire day outside playing with an imaginary gnome and strays far from home. In the Barrens, with no physical markers – hills or trees or buildings – it is easy to get lost. Indeed, Allashua loses her way and has no idea where she is. Finally, far off in the distance, she spots an inukshuk and realizes that it is the one near her house. Using the rock formation as a guide, she finds her way back. The story can be used to give children a sense of the vital importance of the inukshuk and what a friendly symbol it is in the North – a sign of life, home and community.

Another key part of Inuit life is the role of the polar bear both for survival and in terms of the special attributes given to the animal. Children love to learn about animals and the polar bear is one of the most interesting animals to study and unique to Northern cultures. Polar bears are the largest of all bears – males can weigh up to 1,600 pounds – but cubs only weigh 1 to 2 pounds or less than that of a human baby. Teaching about the polar bear is also a good way to introduce children to the effects of global warming. The polar bear is one of the most threatened of all species today due to the sensitive northern environment and the melting of the ice floes. Today's polar bears are a full 15% lighter in weight than they were 20 years ago.

There are two beautifully written books that give a wonderful sense of the importance of the polar bear to the Inuit people – *The Polar Bear Son: An Inuit Tale* (1997) by Lydia Dabovich and *The Polar Bear's Gift* (2000) by Jeanne Bushey. In *The Polar Bear Son* an elderly Inuk woman finds and raises a polar bear cub who becomes a close companion. When the bear matures he hunts and brings her food but it doesn't take long for the men of the village to take a hunter's interest in the bear. To protect her "son," the woman chases the bear away but every so often will stand on the edge of the village and clap for him to come back and visit her. This is an incredibly touching story, retold from a popular oral tale, and beautifully illustrated by the author. It tells of the sensitive relationship between animal and human and illustrates the respect for the bears by the Inuit.

The Polar Bear's Gift is about a young girl, Pani, who like the boys wants to prove herself by hunting her first bear. When she finds a wounded young polar bear named Nanook, she has to decide whether to wait until he dies and then claim she made her first kill, or save the cub and return him to his mother. Though Pani wants to be recognized as a hunter, she

decides to nurse Nanook back to health and is rewarded by the mother bear with a magical bag containing a small piece of fur. When Pani takes the bag home, the fur grows into a thick rug that covers the entire igloo floor. This story teaches not only about the relationship between the Inuit and polar bears but is a moral tale about the power of honesty, caring and giving.

Finally, there is a top notch workbook on Nunavut that is a must have for anyone teaching about the new territory at the elementary level. *Nunavut: Land and People* (2000), by Bill MacDonald (Grades 4-6) is written specifically for educators. The copyright allows teachers to photocopy the entire book for each class of students. The book is packed with exercises about Nunavut and includes maps, projects, pages to color, puzzles, quizzes, etc. This workbook will teach students everything they need to know about the new territory. It also includes something of Northern history (the Northwest Passage) and traditional Inuit life.

By using *Zoom Away* by Tim Wynne-Jones, the works of Michael Kusugak, *The Inukshuk Book*, the two stories about polar bears, and the Nunavut workbook, your students will know all of the basics about Northern history and Inuit life and culture. The stories in these books will give students some of the basic social studies structures that can be built upon in the higher grades. Each one of the suggested books not only tells an engaging story but illustrates an important part of life in the North.

