

JACOBSON, Anna, 2009 *Elnguq: An Eskimo Girl's Childhood in the Alaska Wilderness*, Anchorage, Publication Consultants, 128 pages

Keavy Martin

Volume 34, Number 1, 2010

Les Inuit et le changement climatique
The Inuit and Climate Change

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/045413ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/045413ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiitiit Katimajjiit Inc.
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (print)

1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Martin, K. (2010). Review of [JACOBSON, Anna, 2009 *Elnguq: An Eskimo Girl's Childhood in the Alaska Wilderness*, Anchorage, Publication Consultants, 128 pages]. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 34(1), 176–178. <https://doi.org/10.7202/045413ar>

Greenlandic (often accompanied by Danish and English translations) for every element of this material culture. The comparisons he draws between previous and subsequent years are not uninteresting, but they were not necessary to make this book a success. This publication is relevant for questions pertaining to material and social adjustments in times of contact between different cultures (Greenlanders and Europeans), and for questions about the design and use of tools and equipment of Arctic hunters. For these reasons, I strongly recommend it to all Arctic anthropologists and archaeologists.

Marie-Pierre Gadoua
Department of Anthropology
McGill University
855 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, QC, H3A 2T7, Canada
marie-pierre.gadoua@mail.mcgill.ca

JACOBSON, Anna
2009 *Elnguq: An Eskimo Girl's Childhood in the Alaska Wilderness*, Anchorage, Publication Consultants, 128 pages

This recent translation of a 1990 Yup'ik-language novel—"the only full-length work of creative writing published in Yup'ik"—offers a wider English-speaking audience access to Anna Jacobson's beautifully narrated account of a childhood spent in Southwestern Alaska in the mid-twentieth century. The original was a product of the Alaska Native Language Center, and the English edition, unlike most translations, enhances the source text by cross-referencing its pages with the Yup'ik original. In this way, it enables students of the Yup'ik language to make use of the translation as a gloss while working through the original text. Yet like the Nunavik novel *Sanaaq*, which also had origins in the requirements of language-learners, *Elnguq* proves to be not only useful to a variety of readers, but also capable of delighting its audience artistically.

In the opening lines, the readers are welcomed into the world of the novel via the flickering understanding of a young child:

It was at that time, it is said, that she became aware of the bright beautiful world. Because she didn't know anything yet and didn't even know that she was a human being, she did not observe very much. But, there was a certain something that was sitting beside her, watching her. And because she did not look around, evidently she did not see anything else before she ceased being aware.

Thus we are invited to see the world through the eyes of Elnguq, the title character; we accompany her out of her babyhood (where she is guarded by the family dog, Pili), and follow her step by step as she gradually discovers the place and family into which she has been born. This childhood perspective—so skilfully crafted by the author—is highly appropriate for an English-speaking readership composed primarily of people

unfamiliar with the way of life that Jacobson is describing, whether they are non-Yup'ik or Yup'ik people born and raised in town.

The narrative's love of detail casts it as an autoethnographic document, yet this more pragmatic facet of the text is softened by its fictional nature; one does not get the impression that Jacobson's goal is to preserve or document the culture of her birth. Rather, she lovingly sketches out the beginnings of a tale that lets readers in, but which also—importantly—refuses on occasion to explain itself. One evening, Elnguq experiences “sleep paralysis”—a kind of waking nightmare in which the dreamer cannot move. When Elnguq is finally able to wiggle free, the narrator explains: “It turned out that her mother had done the special, secretive thing that she usually did when one or another of the girls had sleep paralysis in this way, and that's what had caused Elnguq to awaken suddenly.” This non-transparent explanation preserves for the reader a sense of distance, or strangeness; it serves, perhaps, to remind us that our understanding of the Yup'ik world is comparable to that of a child, and that we should not presume to understand it after so brief a visit.

As a long work of fiction, Elnguq is novelistic in form, although it reads more like a memoir written in the third person. The narrative moves along in a linear fashion, and rather than developing a central conflict it sounds out the daily domestic rhythms and mini-dramas that shape the yearly cycle. We meet each of Elnguq's sisters, and share her surprise when one of them, Qalemaq, is sent away to be married—an arranged union that turns out to please everyone, the young bride included. We follow Elnguq as she hunts and traps with her father, and as the family moves with the seasons. And at the centre of the action is Elnguq's mother: the woman who sends her daughters out to pick berries and has given birth by the time they return home, who sets the compound leg fracture of a man injured in a sled accident, and who carefully tends the character of her daughters as she teaches them how to be in the world—to value food and to respect the animals that provide it, not to sleep outdoors (for you may not wake up) and not to blow on feathers (for you could be tossed in the air by a bear). Her lessons guide the readers as much as the girls, as we learn about the values that shape the world of the novel.

Yet in the background lurks the knowledge that the family will soon be moving to town, and that the children will be attending school there. For Elnguq, this is an exciting prospect, and she works hard to learn the alphabet and to pick up English words. Readers of Indigenous literatures, however, may begin to locate this story within a larger, more sinister narrative, in which the recounting of the idyllic childhood is inevitably followed by the assimilative and often traumatic experience of colonial schooling. Yet *Elnguq* ends just before this momentous shift, on the eve of the move to town. As the Afterword explains, the Yup'ik communities of the time were already familiar with some cultural adaptations via trade networks, but the devastation of the tuberculosis epidemic and of residential schooling had not yet taken place. But rather than subjugating her peaceful story to this later turmoil, Jacobson presents it as a complete narrative in itself, with its own heroes and villains, conflicts and resolutions. The book's commentators, furthermore, emphasise continuance—rather than loss—when they explain that “[t]he Yup'ik values and traditions conveyed to Elnguq and her

sisters mainly by their mother in this novel, are still taught to children in the same gentle caring way.” This impression of unbroken family ties, and of the ongoing transference of Yup’ik traditions, is arguably one of the central messages of Jacobson’s book, as it shares its gentle wisdom, and allows its readers a glimpse of its bright, beautiful world.

Keavy Martin
Department of English and Film Studies
3-5 Humanities Center
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 2E5, Canada
keavy@ualberta.ca

NICKELS, Scot, Chris FURGAL, Mark BUELL and Heather MOQUIN
2006 *Unikkaaqatigiit (Putting a human face on climate change). Perspectives from Inuit in Canada*, Ottawa, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Nasivvik Centre for Inuit Health and Changing Environments (Université Laval), Ajunnginiq Centre (National Aboriginal Health Organization), 197 pages.

Unikkaaqatigiit - Putting a human face on climate change evolved from a collaboration between various Inuit communities of Canada (the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut), and their institutions, and research centres, namely the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Nasivvik Centre for Inuit Health and Changing Environments, the Ajunnginiq Centre, and the regional Inuit land claim organisations. In the six languages represented in the project, *Unikkaaqatigiit* provides a synopsis of materials produced in local workshops that took place between 2002 and 2005 on impacts of environmental changes and how they affect communities. In each region, workshops were held in several communities and led by research teams comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members.

The project’s goal is both to provide Indigenous voices with a forum and to contribute to the national and global arena of policy and research on climate change and adaptation. In the foreword, Jose A. Kusugak, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, emphasises that the daily Arctic experiences of climate change impacts, presented and discussed in this book, should raise awareness of, at least, some of the challenges to culture and survival that Arctic communities are facing today. As such, the publication not only leads to suggestions for policy and research, but also serves to raise awareness of the ethical and practical importance of the human dimensions of climate change.

The synopsis is ordered into three sections and summarises findings in written form as well as in very helpful tables and diagrams. The section *Observations* outlines the changes observed by community members. *Impacts* discusses how the changes affect the various areas of life. *Adaptations* provides existing or suggested adaptive strategies as discussed during the workshops. The book concludes by highlighting a number of recommendations for policy and research to address the issues raised in the