

Eskimo Boy Short Guide

Eskimo Boy by Pipaluk Freuchen

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Overview

Eskimo Boy provides an authentic picture of Eskimo life, a culture in many ways different from our own. Freuchen's novel reveals much about the routine of everyday Eskimo life—the meals, clothes, and amusements—as well as the continual struggle for survival in a harsh, unforgiving climate. The author speaks with authority on these matters, having spent much of her childhood in Greenland.

The novel is both a tale of adventure, filled with action and suspense, and a sensitive story of a boy forced to grow up in all too short a time. Freuchen's account of hunting and being hunted on the Greenland ice is exciting in itself.

She describes the Eskimo ways of hunting seal, walrus, fox, and polar bear. The difficulty Ivik, the main character, faces in providing for his grandfather, mother, and younger brother and sisters makes for interesting reading. Eskimo Boy also offers a fascinating glimpse at traditional Eskimo culture, which is now disappearing because of technological advances and the pressures of the outside world. This short novel tells a story of Eskimo life virtually untouched by western culture. There are no snowmobiles, no guns, no radios, no processed foods. Ivik and his family have only what they can make from their environment; they eat only what their skills as hunters and gatherers provide for them.

About the Author

Pipaluk Freuchen was born early in 1918 near the Umanak Colony in Greenland. Her father was Peter Freuchen, the famous Arctic explorer and writer, and her mother, Navarana, was an Eskimo. Most of what is known about Freuchen comes from various accounts written by her father, who gained an international reputation for his 1906 expedition to Greenland's east coast with Knud Rasmussen and for his founding and governorship of the Thule colony in northwest Greenland. Her mother's death in 1921 from Spanish influenza left Freuchen to the care of her father. As a result, she grew up in Thule, the northernmost settlement in the world, and frequently traveled to the various villages along Greenland's west coast. She spent her early years as a typical Eskimo child, learning the language and customs of her people. When she was twelve, however, Freuchen set out with her father to Denmark and a far different way of life.

Her father's writings depict Freuchen as a happy child growing up in the Eskimo culture. Certainly, she faced great difficulties in adapting to life in Denmark. Her older brother, Mequsaq, found himself unable to adjust and returned to Greenland and the Eskimo culture with which he felt at home.

Pipaluk Freuchen stayed, later married a Dane, and only returned to the west coast of Greenland some twenty years later to visit people and places she knew.

Although her father was a prolific writer with over two dozen books to his credit, Freuchen's short novel *Eskimo Boy* is her sole work published in English. In 1958, one year after her father's death, she edited a volume about him that was published in Danish.

Setting

Eskimo Boy begins "on a still summer day in Greenland," with Ivik and his father, Maryark, in their kayaks hunting walrus on the Arctic sea. The family has moved from the west coast of the mainland to a small island off the coast for the summer. After Maryark is killed on the walrus hunt and the rising tide carries Ivik's kayak away from the beach, the summer hunting camp on the island becomes a prison from which there is no escape until winter cold turns the sea into a frozen bridge to the mainland.

Ivik is forced to scour the island in search of food. When food runs out, temperatures fall, and the autumn migration makes hunting even more difficult, Ivik and his family are confined to their small home with no seal oil for either heat or light and nothing to eat but the leather straps of their dog harnesses. Weak, starving, and almost without hope, the family turns to Ivik to make the dangerous trek across the ice to bring food from the family's supplies on the mainland.

Social Sensitivity

Freuchen's novel gives a fascinating introduction to a different culture. Numerous illustrations by Ingrid Vang Nyman accompany the text and help the reader visualize the story. The great differences between the Eskimo culture and U.S. culture provide an example of the concept of cultural relativism and show readers the bias one holds towards one's own culture. Freuchen's explanations of how to kill a polar bear and how to light a lamp with moss and blubber relate valuable information about Eskimo life. Learning that children consider eating small strips of skin from a seal's ribs a special treat or that a delicious way to prepare dinner is to have the outside of the meat hot, the middle raw, and the inside frozen brings home cultural differences for the young reader. *Eskimo Boy* helps readers develop a sense of cultural sensitivity.

Killing and violent death occur throughout the novel, an aspect that some adults might find objectionable.

Yet the violence is an important theme for Freuchen. She makes a clear, direct connection between the death of animals and the food necessary for Ivik's family's survival. When there is no killing, there is hunger; the novel moves between these two poles—good hunting or privation—and Ivik's family understands well that the absence of game brings starvation and death. The relationship between the Eskimo hunter and his game is brought home after Ivik kills the polar bear. Near death and with little strength remaining, Ivik sucks blood from the animal's wound, clearly connecting the death of the animal with his continuing life. Although much animal blood is shed, Freuchen presents the death of the animals with dignity. In addition, nothing is wasted; no animal is ever killed without being consumed.



Literary Qualities

Although lacking in symbolism and complicated plotting techniques, *Eskimo Boy* has many literary qualities to recommend it to a careful reader. Written in the present tense, Freuchen's tale is suspenseful from the opening pages, where Maryark's kayak overturns in the sea. The family's efforts to survive build the suspense. Freuchen carefully structures her work to show Ivik's growth as he faces the various challenges of nature to the survival of his family. In addition, the novel attempts to communicate a sense of the Eskimo language. Dialogue is patterned on features of the native language to give a sense of authenticity.

Details about Eskimo food, clothing, tools, shelter, and customs make the action all the more realistic. The simplicity of the tale and the directness of its presentation lend strength to the novel.

As a hunting story in which a young person matures through learning to rely on his own resources and live off the land, *Eskimo Boy* falls into a literary tradition exemplified by American author William Faulkner's short story "The Bear," published in *Go Down, Moses* (1942). Like Ivik, Faulkner's protagonist, Ike McCaslin, exhibits an abiding respect for the power and the dignity of nature. Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960) also features a character, Karana, who matures when she is stranded on an island, where she learns to survive the often harsh forces of nature. She, too, gains a reverence for nature, taking from it only what she needs. O'Dell, in fact, takes this theme a step further, and by the end of the novel, Karana develops a strong aversion to killing.



Themes and Characters

The protagonist, Ivik, is energetic, proud, and bright, but somewhat boastful. When his father's death forces him into a position of responsibility, Ivik realizes that he is not as grown up as he thought. His grandfather, Kriternerik, is too old and frail to hunt any longer; his mother, Ama, relies on Ivik to provide for his younger brother, Otonia, and his two little sisters, Aviak and Atupaluk. Suddenly, Ivik finds himself the head of the family, with new responsibilities and duties he must perform if the family is to survive. *Eskimo Boy* is a novel of initiation—that is, a novel in which a young person goes through an adult experience and matures. Ivik fulfills his responsibilities to his family, discovers bravery within himself, and learns to put aside his boastfulness in a desperate struggle for survival.

Ivik's only enemy in this short novel is the hostile Greenland environment. In order to survive, he must sharpen his hunting skills and find courage within himself. When he comes upon the polar bear out on the Arctic sea ice, Ivik does more than kill it singlehandedly, he conquers his hunger, thirst, and fear at the same time. The family friends who help him on the ice do not find a boastful boy, but a modest young man who has proven his bravery in service to his family.

Ivik's resourcefulness saves his family; his courage brings their suffering and pain to an end.

Freuchen does not forget that continued life comes only from the death of other animals. Ivik must kill in order for his family to survive. Sources of food include quail found about the camp, the family dog team that is sacrificed, the dead seal that washes onto shore, the polar bear on the ice; in each case, death brings life to Ivik's family. The deaths of these animals are not treated callously.

Indeed, every bit of the animals is used, even the dogs' skins, which Ivik's mother sews into pants for the children. *Eskimo Boy* shows Ivik's place within his family and his family's place within the Greenland environment. This simple tale of a boy growing up has much to teach about the difficulties of accepting responsibility for the welfare of others and of living in balance with nature.



Topics for Discussion

1. Ivik, although well-behaved, is often boastful. Can you identify several instances when he boasts or exaggerates?
2. What sorts of food do Ivik and his family eat? Would you enjoy eating the same foods?
3. Ivik's mother and grandfather kill their dogs for food. Why is it necessary for them to do so? Why do they keep the deaths of these animals a secret from the children?
4. The Eskimo hunters set their dogs upon a polar bear, then kill it. Is this cruel behavior?
5. The hunters who take Ivik home know that the family must have faced some terrible disaster but do not ask Ivik what has happened. Even at the end of the story, Ivik's younger brother and sisters expect that their father will return home soon. Why is it that no one ever mentions the death of Maryark?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some people would say that Maryark's death forces Ivik to grow up quickly. How is this true? Are there other events that help change Ivik from a boastful child to a modest young adult?
2. Daily life in an Eskimo family may seem quite strange to many readers. In what major ways does it differ from your family life? In what ways does it seem the same?
3. How does the weather play an important part in the story?
4. Some people might feel that Eskimo Boy is a book containing far too much violence against animals. How would you answer this objection?
5. Ivik has never attended a formal school, yet he has been taught a great deal. Who are Ivik's teachers and what are the lessons he learns?

For Further Reference

Freuchen, Peter. *Arctic Adventure: My Life in the Frozen North*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1935. In these tales of his experiences, Peter Freuchen recounts his life with Navarana and his children, Mequsaq and Pipaluk. It includes photographs of Pipaluk dressed in Eskimo and in European clothes.

Book of the Eskimos. Edited by Dagmar Freuchen. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1961. A series of essays that focus on Eskimo culture, addressing topics from love and marriage to crime and punishment. The book contains photographs of Pipaluk and the Freuchen family as well as some biographical information.

Martignoni, Margaret E. "Adventure Up North." *New York Times* (November 11, 1951): 28. A short book review representative of the positive critical reception of *Eskimo Boy*.



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