

ABRIDGED INTRODUCTION

« The First Inuit Novel Written:
A Significant Literary and Social Achievement »

Harpoon of the Hunter was a first and Markoosie, the author, is a first, the first Canadian Eskimo to write an original novel.

James H. McNeill, 1975

Issues Surrounding Inuit Literature

Harpoon of the Hunter attests to the will and determination of the Inuit to carry on their culture in different forms. Stories, narratives, tales and legends allow real-life events to live on in memory: in that sense, the story of survival provided by this novel is also a story of cultural survival.

In the foreword to the English version of the novel, published in 1970, James H. McNeill indicates that we should be delighted to see the first Inuit novel appear; at the same time, he points out that its publication was urgent since a literature had to emerge to ensure that the Inuit past, beliefs and ways of life survive in writing. Forty years later, Markoosie still seems concerned about the survival of the Inuit past; as he says, “much of our oral history has been lost or no longer told by those who possess such knowledge of our past.”

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There are many obstacles to the emergence of native literatures, even before they become written. Certainly the years of tutelage, arising from the federal *Indian Act*, had an impact on the Amerindians of Canada as well as on the Inuit, who were relegated a similar status; both were subject to decisions made by outside parties up until the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* was signed in 1975 and Nunavut was created in 1999.

James H. McNeill maintains that few non-natives are capable of committing Inuit stories to writing so that they become part of world literature. Apart from the stories recorded by ethnologists—as social knowledge rather than aesthetic works—Inuit literature has remained largely invisible. Moreover, ethnologists have focused strictly on traditional stories, such as tales and legends, disregarding more contemporary types of narrative.

Yet Inuit authors have been writing for half a century. In so doing, they have been facing steep obstacles. They have long been unrecognized and overlooked. In 1985, Margaret Harry asked: “Where are the Indian and Inuit writers? Many white Canadians, including those who consider themselves well read, cannot name a single Indian or Inuit writer.” Today, twenty-five years later, Harry’s remarks still apply, despite a few exceptions.

Be that as it may, the 1970 publication of Markoosie’s acclaimed novel marked the beginning of an era. *Harpoon of the Hunter* prepared the ground, already cleared by pioneer authors, for other works. Little by little, writings began to roll off the presses—stories by elders and autobiographies—often in bilingual or trilingual form. At the same time, the idea of literariness took hold among Inuit authors. Today, publishing projects are setting the stage for a literature that is finally becoming

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established. That does not diminish the pitfalls authors face. As Zebeedee Nungak pointed out, “the Inuit have a transition to make before they feel comfortable in the field of literature.”

The Problem of “Authenticity”

The political, military and cultural presence of non-natives among the Inuit has clearly had an impact; however, today, the Inuit are encouraging the teaching and speaking of Inuktitut, the preservation of values and stories about the past, the use of various forms of modern communication (radio, television and the Internet) as well as the development of oral practices (song, spoken word, etc.) and, of course, written literature.

The first literary works written in Inuit—*Harpoon of the Hunter* being one of the richest examples—are a blend of forms that draw on both Inuit oral heritage and Western written literary tradition. According to some critics, such a blend diminishes the “authenticity” of the narrative: what the novel gains in formal innovation and literariness, it loses in representativeness of authentic culture. To avoid this problem, Inuit writers have no choice but to assert their right to create works in the same way as writers from all other modern cultures: through a meshing of self and other.

Reception and Historic Importance of the Novel

When you consider that *Harpoon of the Hunter* was the first Inuit novel written in Canada, that it was quickly translated into English and French and that it was printed by a well known publisher, it is very unusual to note that the work received such little attention from critics. Unfortunately, very few studies

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were written about it in specialized journals. For literary history, the novel marks the beginning of a transition from the oral tradition to written literature. Of course Inuit stories were transcribed prior to its publication, but they were recorded by ethnologists and not written directly by Inuit authors. According to James H. McNeill, who encouraged Markoosie to write the novel and helped him find a publisher, *Harpoon of the Hunter* marked the beginning of a new era:

Then came the first original story written in Eskimo. When *Harpoon of the hunter* arrived we could not hide our excitement. We ran the story as a serial in *Inuttituut*, and we encouraged Markoosie to translate it into English. Here, for the first time, is a story of life in the old days, not as it as appeared to southern eyes, but as it has survived in the memory of the Eskimos themselves.

Markoosie: An Exceptional Author

Markoosie Patsauq (ᐱᐃᐅᐅ ᐸᐸᐅᐅᐅᐅ) was born in 1941 on the west coast of Ungava Bay—in present-day Nunavik territory—in Québec. Like other Inuit writers, he was among the people relocated in the 1950s by the federal government from the village of Inukjuak to the High Arctic. Markoosie spent part of his life in Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island, and was not able to return to his native village for many years. He recounts the harrowing story in a piece entitled “Mémoires” published in the magazine *Rencontre* in 1991.

Markoosie wrote a second novel in 1972, *Wings of Mercy*, which appeared in five instalments, in English, in *Inuktitut* magazine. In addition to the story on his relocation to the High

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Arctic, Markoosie has published various works in periodicals. He is not only the author of the first Inuit novel written in Canada, but in 1968 he became the first Inuit aircraft pilot in the country.

For some critics, the significance of Markoosie's work is that it provides an inside view of Inuit culture. For other critics, however, the author is able to offer that view because he lives between two worlds. The idea that the Inuit best placed to convey their culture are those who live between their own world and the non-native world has often been maintained and is still suggested today. Nonetheless, other authors such as Taamusi Qumaq, who are fluent only in Inuktitut, are recognized for their written literary endeavours.

James H. McNeill helped Markoosie find a publisher for the English version of *Harpoon of the Hunter* and achieve the acclaim the novel enjoyed. The English version was translated into French in 1970, into German in 1974 and into Danish in 1995. However, the novel has never been published in book form in Inuktitut until now.

Construction of the novel

In the foreword he wrote in 2010, Markoosie indicates that the story of the novel was told to him in his youth and that it is part of Inuit oral culture. While he may have borrowed some elements from the oral tradition, he wrote a literary work that is richly crafted.

Critics have tended to view the novel in one of two ways: either as an initiation in which a young hero goes through various stages and rises to the challenges that enable him to

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become, as the Inuit say, “a man among men”; or as a novel of survival in which the characters struggle to meet their basic needs, defend themselves against their enemies, and rediscover founding values.

The author carefully planted signs in the narrative warning the reader of difficulties ahead. The novel continually shifts between three different focuses: Kamik and the hunters who have gone out on the expedition; his mother and the other villagers who have stayed behind; and the group of hunters from the neighbouring village who have gone out to rescue Kamik and the others. This shifting between settings drives the narrative, especially since the author adjusts the frequency according to the intensity of the action.

Throughout the novel, warnings precede the misfortunes that befall the characters. There are several signs indicating the course the plot will take and making the accelerated action at the end more plausible—action that would otherwise seem unlikely to the non-native reader. These literary techniques employed by Markoosie reflect the richness of the construction of his novel.

A Violent, Hostile World

The reader unacquainted with Inuit literature will be struck by the importance placed on survival, blunt descriptions, violent acts, and the struggle between the protagonists and nature. In *Harpoon of the Hunter*, Markoosie manages to slip elements into his narrative that overturn preconceived notions about the representation of the Arctic, despite the fact that the work is very much part of a literature of survival and necessity.

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Critics initially looked for characteristics in the work that confirmed stereotypes about the Inuit and the bleakness of the Arctic world: hunters' feeble means of combating the elements, their sense of solidarity, the bitter cold, the scarcity of food and the dangers of the ice.

The world of *Harpoon of the Hunter* is marked by successive deaths, violence and a spirit of vengeance. From the outset, man's relationship with his environment is expressed in terms of combat. The narrative includes a string of deaths: Kamik's father is first to die, followed by the group of hunters attacked by the bear, then Kamik's loved ones who disappear in the glacial waters, and finally Kamik himself. The narrative is fraught with fatality in the face of nature—fatality sometimes bordering on defeatism.

Markoosie's realistic descriptions present death as a bloody, violent act, be it that of the dogs ripped apart by the bear at the beginning of the novel or that of the hunters slaughtered by the animal during their expedition. Markoosie does not spare his reader blunt scenes; through them, he suggests a relationship of equality between man and animal, each just as destitute as the other.

James H. McNeill saw in this narrative a determination to deconstruct the stereotypes of the Far North, which has traditionally been represented as an uninhabited, desolate, lifeless place. The characters' quest for survival would indicate that there are vital forces at work in that world struggling intensely to pursue their existence. Markoosie also overturns some pre-conceived notions in favour of what can be called an "ecology

of the real,” i.e., a determination to set his characters in an environment that is their own.

A Novel of Survival and Solidarity

Profoundly marked by necessity and essentials, Inuit literature conveys a unique message in a manner all its own—a message of man’s ingenuity and ability to survive under the most difficult conditions. In that respect, the work has a rightful place in universal, cultural heritage.

Critiques have emphasized that the extreme conditions of the Arctic provide an ideal setting for a survival novel. In *Harpoon of the Hunter*, Markoosie stresses the threats that his characters have to face: to live, they must be ingenious and brave. Kamik quickly learns to use everything he owns: his sealskin bag, his rope and even his clothes, which can provide sustenance in case of danger.

In this fight for survival, man is not alone; he is in competition with all other living beings—musk oxen, wolves, polar bears—in the quest for survival. Markoosie provides a complex view of animals, which are ferocious to man and exhibit fierce, merciless tactics and determination to ensure their own survival. Man and animal constantly battle the elements and the environment: to survive, man develops values of cooperation and mutual assistance which define his role in the group—the group which he can never leave.

A reflection of his time, Markoosie depicts values of equality between men and women. Like the novel *Agaguk* (1958), by Québec writer Yves Thériault, in which an Inuit woman asserts

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herself in relation to the men, *Harpoon of the Hunter* provides a modern image of the Inuit woman as strong, courageous and unreluctant to assert her point of view.

The Symbol of the Harpoon

The title of this novel is not *The Hunter and His Harpoon* but rather *Harpoon of the Hunter*. The harpoon is the main subject of the work; it is through the harpoon, the hunter's weapon and tool, that man establishes contact with his environment. A symbol of man's strength and weakness in relation to his surroundings—nature, the animal world and other men—the harpoon represents characteristics of the Inuit living condition.

The harpoon accompanies the young Kamik throughout all stages of his transformation into a “man among men.” It is with the harpoon that he kills his first seal, learning patience and the importance of a steady aim. It is also with the harpoon that he manages, in a show of courage, to defeat his first bear. It is with the tip of the harpoon that he ingeniously protects himself from the cold each night by building an igloo in the snow. A symbol of survival and consequently of both strength and weakness, the harpoon enables man to check the solidity of the ice in front of him, attack a seal, bear or even other men if need be. Thus, the vulnerability of Kamik, alone in the vast cold of the night, seems offset by the presence of the weapon at his side.

The harpoon generally symbolizes the struggle between life and death. That makes Kamik's suicide at the end of the novel more comprehensible, as it would otherwise be difficult to grasp in a novel of survival or initiation.

Strangeness of the Suicide

Kamik's suicide at the end of *Harpoon of the Hunter* is a shock for the reader: prepared for a novel for young people, encompassing the successive stages of the boy's initiation into manhood, the reader is confronted in the last lines by what appears at first glance as a tragic defeat: having lost the people close to him, Kamik gives up and fight and takes his own life.

For the critics, Kamik's act reflects a determination not to let nature—harsh and powerful—get the upper hand: his suicide would thus depict a certain victory, which shows that the young man's determination is stronger than the forces of nature. From that perspective, survival would not be, first and foremost, individual, but rather collective: it would be more important for the community that man is able to defeat the forces of nature than the individual. While Kamik's suicide may surprise the reader, it was carefully signalled on more than one occasion before it actually occurred.

At the end of the novel, Kamik has proven that he can be a good hunter; those close to him— his mother, fiancée and friends—are no longer there to see. He isolates himself from the others to commit the act he has considered twice before. He recalls his father's words about eternal peace in which all people find one another. He then looks at his harpoon and wishes not death but the peace that death brings. The first Inuit novel ends with a steady, unhesitating act as the harpoon of the hunter kills for the last time.

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