

Julie Cruikshank, with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. Vancouver/Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, distributed by University of British Columbia Press, 1990.

When I began to review this book, I was asked the question, "Do you think it succeeds in doing what it was intended to do?" In this case the question seems almost the equivalent of asking, "how does one's life succeed?" Or, "how does one's life story succeed?" Even the intent is diffuse: there are so many intentions in the book, so many hopes, so many potential messages and uses, that only time will tell us how the book will be interpreted by its readers. If there is a single unifying theme in Cruikshank's compilation, it is "interpretation." *Life Lived Like a Story* is an invitation to partake in the breadth of human interpretation.

There are five voices in the book. Angela Sidney, a Tagish/Tlingit woman, takes the lessons of traditional language and lore and uses them to interpret experience in the present era. Kitty Smith, also Athapaskan/Tlingit, incorporates legends, place names and customs into a vivid account of the women in her family and their initiative and independence. A third Athapaskan/Tlingit woman, Annie Ned, weaves episodes of her life story into the significant songs, stories and other traditional teachings of her time. Julie Cruikshank recorded the stories and introduces them, building a frame for entering the realm of culture as it reveals itself in the life story. The fifth voice is autonomous, the pillar around which the other voices revolve: the voice of traditional story itself, always intimate with the teller but having a continuity all its own.

*Life Lived Like a Story* may well appeal to multiple readerships. Folklorists will recognize the themes of myth, legend and place names that echo in the book. Linguists are offered glimpses of Tagish, Tutchone and Tlingit languages—although the stories are recorded in English, Cruikshank retains Indigenous names. Angela Sidney, who died in early 1991 after the publication of the book, was the last speaker of Tagish, so Cruikshank's work with her will have added value in preserving what is shown of the language.

The work has relevance to women's studies, adding to a growing collection of Indigenous women's life histories from across North America. Native and northern studies programs will find valued supplemental readings on topics ranging from contact history to band societies to

identity. It is less likely that the book would be picked up by the public for recreational reading; many of the stories are difficult for English speakers to understand. Nonetheless, there is an innate poetry in the stories that will appeal to some.

If there is a weakness in the structure of the book, it may indeed be that Cruikshank has attempted to provide too many frames for analysis. It is a challenge: when presenting life history from cultures and languages that speak very differently from those of most of the readers, how does one provide meaningful clues to interpretation? As Cruikshank herself points out (p. 4), even offering conventional ethnographic explanation from an outsider's perspective may betray the insider's perspective rather than elucidate it. Cruikshank does not overload the texts with theory, but what is supplied is fragmented. We learn about fieldwork and ethnographic construction, about myth and structuralism, and about life history as a method. Those familiar with Cruikshank's previous publications will recognize some of the arguments about the use of oral tradition in teaching, and about the symbolism of women's resourcefulness to be found in myth and legend. Each of these arguments has merit, and each opens another door to interpretation, but together they compete for the reflection they deserve.

What does integrate the book, however, is the relationship of the voices. Cruikshank's candid insights into her interactions with these women, and her attention to the significant aspects of their lives and personalities, evoke the essence of her relationship with them in a way that few ethnographies succeed in doing. In the recent flurry of literature in anthropology and sociology on hermeneutics and the art of constructing text from experience, there has been a call for the "plurivocal" text. If, as many argue, anthropology has never really had scientifically persuasive success by revealing the insider's knowledge through conventional texts written by outsiders, then perhaps it is time to let insiders speak for themselves (see, for example, Clifford 1988; Atkinson 1990; Marcus and Fischer 1986). The function of the ethnographer shifts radically. Although still a bridge between cultures, the relationship of the ethnographer to the storyteller parallels the relationship between the reader and the text. By explaining how culture presents and transforms itself through the fieldwork dialogue, the ethnographer assists the reader in interpreting and relating to the text.

Although Cruikshank may not have intended it to be so, this appears to be what she has done here. Long after the book has been mined for tidbits on linguistic and thematic constructions, puberty rites and gold rush lore, the value of the relationships contained within will be enduring—and, in my best guess, that will be the "proof of success." There may be no



single definitive interpretation of the book and its contents, but there is a sense that progress has been made in understanding what cultural interpretation is all about.

Peggy Brizinski

## References

- Atkinson, Paul. *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Marcus, George E., and Fischer, Michael. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

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Jens Peder Hart Hansen, Jorgen Meldgaard and Jorgen Nordqvist, Editors, *The Greenland Mummies*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991 (192 pages).

Books devoted to the archaeology and/or physical anthropology of the circumpolar region are, as a rule, very rare. Rarer still are books on the peoples and past cultures of the far north designed to appeal to a broad public readership. Since 1987, however, two such books have gone to press: *Frozen in Time* by Beattie and Geiger (1987), first published in 1987;<sup>1</sup> and the 1991 English edition of *The Greenland Mummies* by Hansen, Meldgaard and Nordqvist (1991).

*Frozen in Time* tells the tale of the exhumation and medical examination of the incredibly well-preserved bodies of three sailors associated with the ill-fated Franklin expedition to discover the Northwest Passage. Prior to the publication of this work the general public had been riveted (perhaps as much by our morbid curiosity with the dead as by any intellectually motivated interest) by the well-publicized (in newspapers, magazines and television) unveiling of the three 150-year-old faces—faces that could in fact have been our own. This, of course, virtually guaranteed the success of the book.

*The Greenland Mummies* describes the discovery, excavation and scientific study of the 500-year-old mummified remains of eight Greenlandic Inuit buried in two adjacent graves near the abandoned west Greenland settlement of Qilakitsoq. Though perhaps less immediately compelling to the ethnocentric European psyche than the frozen faces of John Torrington, John Hartnell and William Braine, *The Greenland*