

# THE BAFFIN WRITERS' PROJECT

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**S**INCE THE 1940s, a massive cultural, technological and military invasion from the South has irrevocably changed the Inuit way of life. Only fifty years ago, the Inuit of Baffin Island lived pretty much as their ancestors had for countless generations, except for the addition of a few trade goods and the Bible. Then came American airbases during World War II, the Cold War DEW-Line radar stations, and widespread oil and gas exploration. The federal government encouraged permanent settlement to ease the task of administering southern-style health and education services; this policy transformed self-sufficient nomadic hunters into largely unemployed town dwellers in little more than a generation. Today, TV plays a major role in shaping the cultural landscape of Inuit children.

Inuit people know what has to be done if Inuit culture is to survive and develop into the twenty-first century. In addition to maintaining control over their lands, they must keep speaking their language; quickly develop high-level literacy skills in Inuktitut and English; preserve existing knowledge and stories from the threatened oral tradition for future generations; ensure that their own concerns and culture are articulated in the books or magazines they read, the TV shows they watch, and materials they study; and educate other Canadians about Inuit culture, perspectives and concerns. For all of these activities, writing is an essential tool.

But until very recently, books published in Inuktitut were almost non-existent. The situation with newspapers and magazines in the North has not been much better, with most articles written in English and only a few translated into Inuktitut, often poorly. While many books have been written about the Arctic or about Inuit people, very little of what has been written has reflected an Inuit viewpoint: Inuit and non-Inuit alike have seen Inuit culture reflected through southern eyes. Similarly, in northern schools, curriculum materials have been in English and have reflected a southern perspective, though on Baffin Island this is now changing due to innovative curriculum development on the part of the Inuit-run Baffin Divisional Board of Education. Because of the relative isolation of the North, the

resulting short period of colonization, and the large number of native Inuktitut speakers, Inuktitut is one of the few aboriginal languages in Canada given a fair chance of survival, but its future is by no means secure. It is in this context that the Baffin Writers' Project has developed.

**T**HE PROJECT WAS FOUNDED IN 1988. Its aim is to encourage Inuit people to write in their own language and out of their own concerns, and to enable others, both Inuit and non-Inuit, to read what they have written. Through writing workshops for adults and students, the launching of new publications and awards, and the introduction of desktop publishing facilities into participating communities, we hope to nurture Inuit creative writing as well as encourage the recording of traditional stories, skills, and oral history.

Twice a year, in co-operation with the Baffin Divisional Board of Education, the project sends writers for two-week visits to five participating communities on Baffin Island — Cape Dorset, Clyde River, Igloolik, Iqaluit, and Pond Inlet — where they conduct writing workshops in schools and for community and adult education groups, give public readings, speak on the radio, and work with interested local writers on a one-to-one basis. The writers' visits involve all segments of the community — children, adults, and elders. The visits are co-ordinated in each community by a local facilitator; the latter are also beginning to work year round to support local writing and publishing by establishing ongoing writing groups, acting as contacts for writers seeking publication or other writing-related information, and working with other organizations within the communities.

Inuit and Native writers are the project's main resource; so far, thirteen of the seventeen visiting writers have been aboriginal. Participating writers have included Minnie Freeman, Alooook Ipellie, Alice French, Maria Campbell, Salli Benedict, Jordan Wheeler, Jeannette Armstrong, Dennis Lee, and Rudy Wiebe. Writers scheduled for the next round of visits in early February 1990 include Inuit writers Michael Kusugak and Sam Metcalfe, and Native writers Joy Asham Fedorick and Jordan Wheeler.

The project's history reflects the contributions made by Inuit, Native, and white participants as well as their willingness to work together to develop an appropriate structure. The project was initiated by southern writer David Young, who originally envisaged the project as a writer-in-residence program bringing southern writers into northern schools. This focus changed with my involvement, since I had had more contact with aboriginal writers, and with the subsequent participation of Native writers Jeannette Armstrong and Maria Campbell in the pilot project; we felt strongly that aboriginal, and particularly Inuit, writers should be the backbone of the project.

For the first year, David and I co-ordinated the project, along with Sandy McAuley of the Baffin Divisional Board of Education. In September of 1989, the project reached a watershed with the transfer of control to an Inuit co-ordinator and board of directors and with the decision to expand the project to include a circumpolar literary magazine and writing awards. The project is now an Inuit-run organization; the qallunaat (Inuktitut term for whites — it actually means “bushy eyebrows”) have become the fundraisers. The present co-ordinator, Alooook Ipellie, is a prolific and widely published Inuit writer as well as a gifted artist and cartoonist; for many years he edited Inuit magazines, notably *Inuit* and *Inuit Today*.

In the fall of 1989, the project’s original Inuit Advisory Board was formally replaced by a board of directors consisting of six Inuit with expertise in the broad field of writing, including members of the Baffin Divisional Board of Education’s children’s publishing program, an executive producer for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in Iqaluit, a television reporter for CBC’s northern network, a member of the Toonooniq theatre group in Pond Inlet, and a literacy specialist from the Arctic College teacher education program.

The November 1989 visits marked the first time that the visits were conducted entirely by Inuit writers, and their reception confirmed that Inuit writers are uniquely able to inspire the students and adult learners the project has targeted.

In the first year of the project, students in the participating schools compiled three issues of *Titirausivut*, a student literary magazine, with increasing proportions of writing in Inuktitut in each issue. The magazine was compiled alternately by students in Pond Inlet, Igloodik, and Cape Dorset and Clyde River, and was published in Pond Inlet using desktop publishing equipment donated to the project by the Apple Canada Educational Foundation. Other publications included the *Inuktionary*, an Inuktitut dictionary for novices produced with the assistance of poet Fred Wah; *Anuri*, a collection of poetry produced by students in Pond Inlet; and numerous small hand-illustrated books in all four communities. These publications have been placed in school libraries, some of which are open to the community, and are actively used for teaching purposes.

Visiting writers were also able to assist local teachers, as Jeannette Armstrong reported from Cape Dorset:

I do a workshop for the staff of the Pitseolak school. . . . I cover how culture is transmitted through communication. How communication contains metaphor and symbols which are culturally defined. I cover how stories, legends, myths, stories, songs, etc. contain various forms of metaphors and symbols. I talk about archetypes in literature and how these are cultural constructs. I speak about the importance of maintaining cultural integrity through language in translation and the importance of correctness of the use of metaphor and interpretation of symbols and archetypes for teaching purposes. I speak of the cultural value systems contained in the literature of a people. I speak of the need for Inuit people themselves to tell their own stories

for the continued health of their people. I explain how identity loss and culture shock occur and result in the conditions apparent in many Native communities. I speak of how education can turn that around with the use of culturally relevant and appropriate materials and how the literature of Inuit people is integral to that.

**B**UT THE PROJECT WAS NOT LIMITED to in-school activities, and in fact, we are putting more and more emphasis on writing activities which involve the community. In this respect, the project has been particularly successful in Igloodik, where last year Inuit writer Alice French initiated a writing group of older women. In November 1989, when French returned for a second visit, she discovered that the group she had founded had continued to meet throughout the year, was just completing a first book on traditional caribou clothing, and was busy making plans for a second. Also in November, French brought together students and a group of older men, so that the students could write down the elders' stories; this group appears to be flourishing, especially since the community co-ordinator, Rhoda Qanatsiaq (who just published her own first book), is now meeting regularly with its members.

Rudy Wiebe had this to say after his stay in Igloodik:

Some of them needed encouragement to begin writing their stories (invariably they have exciting life-stories to tell, but many are now thinking of actually recording them for the first time); others had already done some things tentatively and their mss. needed careful reading and discussion; others were working on book-length mss. and needed editorial advice and/or suggestions regarding, organization, style, possible publishers and their idiosyncracies. All in all, for a community of about 1000 people there seemed to be an extraordinary amount of serious writing going on, and even more to develop.

In addition to this grassroots work in the communities (I wonder if there is an Arctic equivalent to the word "grassroots"?) the project has also begun to develop various networks which further the aims of the project. First and foremost, Inuit writers, who have often worked in isolation in the past, are getting to know each other and are working together. The project is gradually making this network circumpolar, with its decision to send a delegate to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in the summer of 1989, and the inclusion of an Alaskan Yupik writer in the last round of writers' visits. In future, we hope to invite writers from northern Quebec, the western Arctic, and Greenland.

As aboriginal writers, Native and Inuit writers share many of the same concerns: for example, using writing as a tool for community development, the issue of aboriginal copyright and cultural appropriation, the lack of publishing outlets, and the need for aboriginal editors. Recognizing this commonality, the Baffin Writers' Project has drawn upon the expertise of those involved in other projects attempting

to develop aboriginal literature, such as the En'Owkin International School of Writing, Earthtones North, and the Committee to Reinvent the Trickster. This sharing has occurred in both directions; Inuit writer Minnie Freeman, for example, is on the board of the En'Owkin International School of Writing.

Links were also forged between the Baffin Writers' Project and the writing community in the South. The project put the Baffin Divisional Board of Education in touch with a southern publisher who wanted to explore the feasibility of publishing some of the BDBE's titles for a southern market. In addition, those southern writers who visited northern communities have continued to support the Inuit writers they met through writing grant appraisals, helping writers find publishers, and offering editorial assistance.

In September of 1989, project co-ordinator Alooook Ipellie gave a reading at the international PEN Congress. During a panel discussion, he spoke about the problems faced by Inuit writers. Eighteen writers from around the world who were attending the Congress visited the North as guests of the project, met Inuit writers, were briefed about the project's activities, and visited northern communities to learn about northern issues.

At the time of writing, the project's organizers are busy developing two new initiatives — a new literary magazine and writing awards. The project is launching an international Inuit literary periodical, which will accept submissions from adults and children all over the circumpolar Arctic. The magazine will emphasize writing in Inuktitut, though English submissions will also be accepted, particularly from international contributors. The magazine will be an independent forum for Inuit and will be published twice a year, with the aim of eventually becoming a quarterly.

While the emphasis of the writers' visits is on writing as an everyday skill, an outlet for self-expression, and a way to pass on Inuit culture, the writing awards will recognize and encourage those Inuit who have the talent to be professional writers and who have already made a significant contribution to the development of Inuit literature. In the spring of 1990 the Baffin Writers' Project will, for the first time, honour literary achievement in the Baffin region; substantial prizes will be awarded for excellence in a number of categories. The emphasis will be on writing in Inuktitut, though some awards will be open to writing in English as well.

So far, we've birthed the baby and have been pleased with the results. But these are only beginnings — often tentative, exploratory, or fragile. While we have been reasonably lucky with our funding (after an unbelievable amount of bureaucracy, at least some of the money eventually arrives), it is by no means assured. And everything involving the North is expensive. This doesn't stop us from dreaming about other things we'd like to see in the future: an intensive summer writing workshop, translation projects (for translating books on the North into Inuktitut), the sponsoring of a conference bringing together writers from the circumpolar Arctic, and an Inuit-run publishing house.

## AN INTRODUCTORY BIBLIOGRAPHY OF INUIT LITERATURE

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