The Orphan and the Polar Bear by S. Qaunaq

Sandy Campbell

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Abstract


One of the common themes in Inuit stories is that of the orphan child alone on the land. In this version, told by Arctic Bay elder Sakiasi Qalinaq, who learned his stories from his grandmother, the orphan is abandoned by hunters from his village and adopted by a village of polar bears. The bears teach him to hunt and survive on the land and, when he is grown, return him to his people. The image on the cover of the book showing the child riding the polar bear is an iconic one. This mythological relationship between child and polar bear is also found in non-Inuit literature, most notably in Philip Pullman's The Golden Compass.

In the bears’ village the orphan is trained to hunt and survive on the land. The bears also teach him their traditional wisdom. For example, when one of the bears wants to go “push down” some humans because they “look so silly standing on their skinny legs”, a wiser elder bear says, “Never talk that way...don’t make humans our enemy. Stay clear of them and their camps.”

The book is primarily a picture-book. Unlike many of the other books of Inuit legends published by Inhabit Media, the pictures are not scary. Rather they are quite beautiful. The extra width of the landscape format gives artist, Eva Widermann, the opportunity to spread her illustrations across two pages reflecting the wide expanses of the Arctic. Text usually takes up one corner or a few lines of a page. Widermann’s images are realistic. However, because this story is from a time when animals could shape-shift into human form, she sometimes gives the bears human postures and gestures. For example, in the image on page 15, the polar bear is standing with a harpoon grasped in its front paws, handing it to the orphan. Bears are also shown in their human form in three images. In the image on page 20, depicting the inside of an igloo in the bears’ village, a woman with human form is tending the fire.

Overall this is a lovely rendition of the story. While designed for an elementary school audience, anyone with an interest in traditional Arctic tales will enjoy it. Recommended for elementary schools and public libraries.

Recommendation: 4 out of 4 stars
Reviewer: Sandy Campbell

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Author Biography

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The Orphan and the Polar Bear makes this beautiful traditional tale widely accessible for the first time. Read More. “An evocative story that provides a window into an often-ignored culture.” View Review quote. “This is a great book to introduce people to a culture with which they may not be familiar, and a fantastic way of preserving a story for future generations of the people who belong to it. Highly Recommended.” View Review quote.

Directed by Neil Christopher. With Johnny Issaluk. According to Inuit oral history, long ago animals had the power of speech, could shift their appearances, and could even assume human form. In The Orphan and the Polar Bear, a neglected orphan is adopted by a polar bear elder. Under the bear’s guidance, the little orphan learns the skills he will need to survive and provide for himself. According to Inuit oral history, long ago animals had the power of speech, could shift their appearances, and could even assume human form.
In The Orphan and the Polar Bear, a neglected orphan is adopted by a polar bear elder. Under the bear’s guidance, the little orphan learns the skills he will need to survive and provide for himself. Sakiasi Qaunaq has lived most of his life in the Arctic Bay area. His grandmother told him stories as a child and fostered in him a love for traditional legends. In his youth the stories were told for entertainment, but today he feels their retelling is crucial to sustaining Inuit traditions and culture. This a visually beautiful book with a beautiful traditional story of an orphan boy befriended by a polar bear who trains him to be a great hunter. Amazon also sells this book written in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. This story, with the same wonderful illustrations was also made into a short film and won the "Best Animation" award at the Montreal First Peoples’ Festival and the "Best Canadian Short Drama" award at the ImagineNative Festival in Toronto. Hope to see this DVD for sale on Amazon soon.