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from the shackles of silence have something for America to hear. Their message takes its soundings from the deep, from that time before the reservations, from that time when men truly knew something about freedom.

Woody Kipp, enrolled Blackfeet member  
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**The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told by My People.**  
By Lela Kiana Oman. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995.  
122 pages. \$22.50 paper.

Lela Kiana Oman's *The Epic of Qayaq* is an engrossing retelling of the Qayaq myth—a story known in other versions to the Inuit of Russia, Canada, and Greenland—and one that Oman heard from her father and other storytellers before setting down her rendition of the narrative in 1947. Oman reminds her readers that *Qayaq* is especially vital to Alaska's Iñupiaq people, of whom she is one, and for whom this epic is the seminal story of origin and culture. Oman has taken on a dual challenge: how best to transmit an Iñupiaq *oral* narrative into written English, and how to shape a work of *epic* length that requires a month of evenings for oral telling by condensing it to a modest 120 pages without sacrificing its drama, mystery, and sense of expanse. Only readers who have heard the story told aloud can hazard such a comparative evaluation, but because Oman has brought the epic to written prose, her work must of course be judged by that standard.

In this regard Oman's reduction of *Qayaq* to the page is most satisfying, beginning with her terse preamble account of the Iñupiaq genesis on two mountaintops amidst endless water and their subsequent dispersal throughout the Arctic regions. The central motif of good and evil is effectively introduced when the dwellers of the east mountain begin experimenting with shamanism—often for selfish reasons—balanced by the dwellers of the west mountain whose approach to life is more loving and gentle.

With this rift in place, and the descendants of the first Inuit scattered around the globe, Oman focuses on the newborn Qayaq, whose parents fish for whales on Alaska's Selawik Lake, and who wish to hold onto Qayaq, the youngest of twelve sons and the only one still at home. Oman skillfully interweaves the qualities of epic storytelling and Iñupiaq culture. As befitting an epic figure, Qayaq is larger than life, a hero with the stamina to

wander by kayak and foot throughout Alaska and parts of Canada doing good, a shaman-in-the-making who peers into the souls of other men and women while changing himself at moments of crisis into caribou, weasel, ptarmigan, hawk, mountain sheep, and fish to overcome powerful adversaries.

Qayaq's journey is a quest to defeat evil wherever he finds it, and a few of his adventures are reminiscent of epics from other cultures—the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale when Qayaq defeats a human-devouring sea monster; Scylla and Charybdis from Homer's *Odyssey* when he destroys two jaw-like rocks that crush men to death on the Noatak River; the Achilles' heel episode when Qayaq kills a stone bird by wounding its vulnerable ankle. Oman is careful to establish the source of Qayaq's power as both inherited and earned. He is born with the uncanny ability to dodge arrows and knives aimed at him, and his parents enhance his power by teaching him songs that will give him extra strength and by feeding him pebbles and food with magical powers that fortify Qayaq at critical times. He shrewdly obtains other gifts, including tools and weapons, from men and women he meets throughout his long journey.

The book's strength rests with Oman's style. Relying as it does on the storyteller's devices of voice, gesture, and facial expression, Iñupiaq storytelling is largely bereft of literary symbolism, but Oman compensates with a judicious use of similes. The stone bird Qayaq defeats is likened to a "big gray hill" (p. 39) and clouds are "painted pink by the setting sun" (p. 41). Indeed, it is the detailed descriptions of nature that give the book much of its appeal and distinguish it from other, similar Northern epics such as Catherine Attla's *K'etetaalkkaanee: The One Who Paddles Among the People and Animals*, and Emily Ivanoff Brown's *The Longest Story Ever Told: Qayaq: The Magical Man*. Oman gives a vivid picture of the fall landscape along a wooded Kobuk River, of a blizzard that effaces the landscape, and of the varieties of snow seen under the ever-changing light. The characters Qayaq encounters are very much a part of the natural world, and Oman carefully describes how they look, behave, and live. We are provided vivid portraits of clothing, hair styles, tools, weapons, and dwellings.

To further aid readers in understanding the people and customs that inhabit the epic, Oman includes a sprinkling of key Iñupiaq words with parenthetical or footnoted explanations: *ee-chuck-sutt* (p. 16), the special tent where babies are born; *Umialik* (p. 20), village chief; and *Iqsingat* (p. 31), souls of the

Living Dead who perished in the original flood. These words recur frequently enough so readers absorb a comfortable introduction to the culture.

Also in keeping with the storyteller's art—here successfully translated to the page—is Oman's use of repetition, occasional reiteration of key points to remind readers of the larger picture when Oman concludes events that branch off from the story's main trunk. An example is Oman's recounting of the background of a Umialik who is one of Qayaq's main opponents. This "branch" story, a separate tale rather than a subplot, deepens the reader's understanding of the evil Qayaq faces while simultaneously expanding the experience of Iñupiaq culture. The repetition following the branch story gives continuity as well as emphasis to important motifs. At the start of each new section of the epic we are told that Qayaq "paddled and paddled" (p. 13) or "walked and walked" (p. 18), a refrain that underscores the epic nature of the tale of a wanderer going from one adventure to another while traversing considerable time and distance. Another branching off occurs with the account of the great flood told to Qayaq by one of his succession of five wives. As the foundation of Iñupiaq oral culture, the account is an informative story within a story that ties together loose threads from other parts of the epic.

Oman's technique acquaints the reader with the texture of Iñupiaq society. Volubility and direct speech—admired in most Western discourse—are avoided in favor of silence and circumlocution. Volumes are communicated when the women converse with a nod or glance, and important occurrences are frequently revealed in a roundabout way: when a weasel appears mysteriously before an old woman she knows that "something that was not a little matter was being shown to her!" (p. 55) This particular example of understatement underscores the special nature of the weasel while adding a moment of humor.

Oman holds readers' attention by successfully building suspense. During Qayaq's contest with the stone bird the tension is heightened as Qayaq tries ploy after ploy to defeat his awesome opponent—each time with increased desperation. Oman tightens the suspense further by pausing to describe the ferocity of the bird's eyes or Qayaq's pounding heart before plunging back into the action—a dramatic technique that makes good storytelling.

This publication is significantly enhanced by the preface by Ann Chandonnet, which provides helpful comments on Inuit storytelling and lore, and the introduction by Priscilla Tyler and Maree

Brooks, which offers valuable insights into the epic's themes and Oman's own background. The book is generously illustrated with reproductions from the Priscilla Tyler and the Maree Brooks Collection of Inuit Art at Carleton University—black-and-white and color plates of sculptures, lithographs, stonecut stencils, and other two-dimensional works. The subject matter reflected in the plates complements many of the epic's incidents and characters without being redundant, and provides an impressive sampling of the variety and vitality of Inuit art. Lela Kiana Oman's telling of the Qayaq epic should be welcomed by those interested in Inuit life as well as anyone who enjoys a well-told story.

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**From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous Peoples.** Edited by Sylvia O'Meara and Douglas A. West. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1996. 154 pages. \$18.95 paper.

This collection of papers from the first biennial Aboriginal Peoples Conference at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay enables the readers to do what the title promises—learn from indigenous peoples. It focuses on issues of interaction between Natives and non-Natives in academic settings. Indigenous people often teach and live in various worlds; this collection presents perspectives from those different worlds. The papers draw the reader into multidimensional, intercultural dialogues. Readers cannot help but be enriched by the many voices heard.

One of the most enlightening examples of the manner in which cultural explanations enrich reading experiences is found in Lola L. Hill's contribution, "The Laying of Lipsha." In discussing Louise Erdrich's first four novels with an emphasis on the touchstone character of Lipsha, Hill illuminates the Ojibwe/Chippewa/Anishinaabe world. A culturally uninformed reader gets surface meaning, poetry, and great stories by reading Erdrich's works. After reading Hill's paper, the reader gains cultural insights and realizes more fully just how very good Erdrich's writing is.

With Hill's guidance the reader no longer sees Lipsha as just a young man struggling to find his identity; he is also seen as a trickster from a long line of tricksters. Readers begin to realize that Lipsha's great-grandmother, Fleur, really does have bear