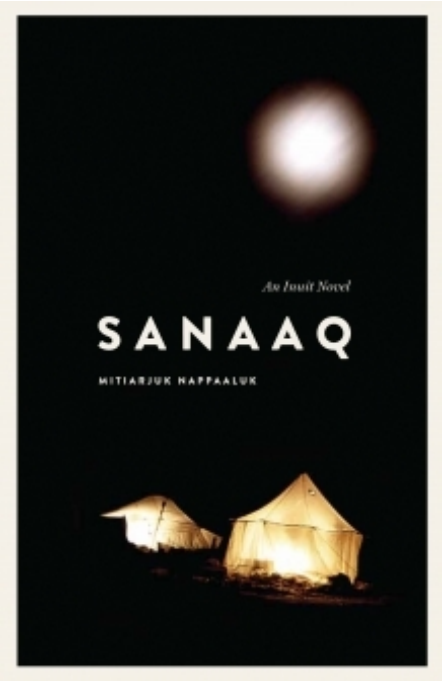

Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel

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Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk (Contributor) , Bernard Saladin d'Anglure (Translator) Sanaaq is an intimate story of an Inuit family negotiating the changes brought into their community by the coming of the qallunaat, the white people, in the mid-nineteenth century. Composed in 48 episodes, it recounts the daily life of Sanaaq, a strong and outspoken young widow, her daughter Qumaq, and their small semi-nomadic community in northern Quebec. Here they live their lives hunting seal, repairing their kayak, and gathering mussels under blue sea ice before the tide comes in. These are ordinary extraordinary lives: marriages are made and unmade, children are born and named, violence appears in the form of a fearful husband or a hungry polar bear. Here the spirit world is alive and relations with non-humans are never taken lightly. And under it all, the growing intrusion of the qallunaat and the battle for souls between the Catholic and Anglican missionaries threatens to forever change the way of life of Sanaaq and her young family.

About the translation:

In the early 1950s, Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk was asked by a priest working in Kangiqsujuaq in northern Quebec to write down some Inuttitut phrases to assist him in the study of the language. At the age of twenty-two, Nappaaluk began writing but did not stop at mere phrases. She invented a group of characters and events and, over the next twenty years, wrote the first Inuit novel, simultaneously reinventing the novel form.

Due in part to the perseverance of French anthropologist Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, Sanaaq was first published in syllabic Inuttitut in 1987. His French translation appeared in 2002. This English translation now brings this cornerstone of Inuit literature to Anglophone readers and scholars.

Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel Details

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From Reader Review Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel for online ebook

Julia Lo says

An incredible book about the daily life of an Inuit family in Nunavik. I'd give it five stars for its cultural and literary importance, three stars for the pleasure derived from reading it. Would like to read the French version, once I find it.

Highly recommended to anyone who's interested in Northern Canada or Inuit culture (except perhaps those who are squeamish about hunting).

Lisa says

Quebec is such a vast province. Far north of my home in Montreal lies Nunavik, the northernmost region of Quebec, where fourteen Inuit communities are strung out along the coast. The lives of the Inuit of Northern Quebec have changed radically over the past century. When Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk was born in 1931, the Inuit had a primarily nomadic lifestyle intimately tied to the seasons and to the hunt. By the late 1960's, when Mitiarjuk was completing her manuscript, the Inuit had been settled into villages with pre-fabricated houses. The immense changes brought about by sustained contact with Qallunaat (white people, though a more direct translation is "big eyebrows") are touched upon in the novel: the introduction of government pensions, the prolonged disruptions caused by medical evacuations to the south, religious conversion, and the question of interracial sexual relations. On a larger scale, Mitiarjuk offers us candid glimpses into a culture that can be immensely difficult for an outsider to penetrate.

As a document, *Sanaaq* is utterly unique. Written over a span of decades, then transliterated and twice-translated over an equally long period, it is a stunning repository of linguistic and anthropological knowledge. While Mitiarjuk never attended school, she was taught short-form syllabics by a missionary eager to learn Inuktitut. Her writing reflects this preoccupation with language, introducing myriad terms used in various day-to-day activities. *Sanaaq* is composed of 48 episodic chapters that follow the lives of Sanaaq and her community, and is generally considered a novel. It is, therefore, the first novel written in Inuktitut syllabics, and written by someone who did not know any alphabet and had never read a novel before, no less.

Mitiarjuk's writing style is straightforward and dynamic, steeped in the present and studded with dialogue. This concern with the here and now is doubtless tied to the unforgiving landscape of Northern Quebec, where tragedy is woven into the fabric of life. The importance of kinship ties are reinforced by the use of numerous words that do not exist in English. Here are but a few examples:

nuakuluk: kinship term used by a woman for her sister's child
Aikuluk: reciprocal kinship term, used by in-laws of the opposite sex and the same generation, e.g., the wife of a man's brother or the sister of a man's wife
arnaliaq: term used by a midwife for a daughter that she has helped deliver, literally "the female that she has made"

Other aspects of the Inuit belief system can likewise be gleaned from the vocabulary alone. I'll leave them here for you to chew on...

qunujaq: ominous prophetic dream
tuurngaq: term for a shaman's helping spirit. Used as a name for the devil by some of the first missionaries.
nuliarsaq: invisible female love, succubus - the episode where this term was introduced was particularly fascinating.

I really hadn't intended to turn this review into an annotated glossary but... bear with me, please! Just a few more and I'll stop, I promise.

Iikikii!: exclamation to express feeling of damp cold (dry cold is called *ikkii*)
puttajiaq: seriously wounded or dead marine mammal, whose body is floating on the water's surface
Qumaq: persons's name, literally "white-coloured intestinal worm" found in seals, humans, and fishes - yes, that's like calling your child Tapeworm.

It is difficult for me to fathom just how much life in Nunavik has changed over such a short period of time. It was also jarring for me to read how quickly any new idea introduced by the Qallunaat was accepted. I don't know how much of this positivity reflects the general feeling at the time, Mitiarjuk's own attitudes, or a consideration for the audience she was writing for (missionaries at first, then anthropologists). But I cannot reflect on this period without fast-forwarding to 2015, when an overwhelming number Inuit in Nunavik live against a backdrop of unimaginable poverty and violence. I am not here to judge which poverty is worse, the spectre of starvation haunting hunters in a lean winter or the overcrowded house where incest rubs shoulders with substance abuse. These are generalizations, yes, but they are also a reality, and one that seems so far removed from the simple scenes depicted by Mitiarjuk, where a bad day means you just knocked over the pail of mussels you spent all morning collecting under the sea ice. At least Sanaaq and her family weren't forcibly "relocated" to the High Arctic, as was the fate of some families in the 1950s, or simply "lost" after being sent to sanatoriums down south. I sense that I'm going off on a tangent here, but it is such a little-talked about corner of our recent history with such lasting repercussions that I wish Mitiarjuk had kept writing *Sanaaq* for another fifty years.

If you do seek this novel out, I have a few recommendations for you. Read it curled up by a window with snowflakes drifting by, with the otherworldly sound of traditional throat-singing in the background, sipping on some Labrador tea, and take it slowly, a few episodes at a time. It was my recipe and it worked.

Cara says

Not really a novel in the traditional sense but a set of very short stories. The book gave good insights into the lives of Inuit people.

Jordan says

A record of difficult, but simple lives led in the Canadian Arctic. Much of the book laments the simple-mindedness of the Inuit characters who populate the author's world. They risk their lives to hunt and fish, yet often (read unbelievably often) leave the food out in the open where dogs, birds or other animals make off with the bounty. They make foolish choices which result in death or serious disease. They trust strangers and routinely ignore the good advice of their own companions.

If you have no knowledge of the northern indigenous peoples, this will be a good start, but certainly neither the last word nor an exhaustive study.

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secondwomn says

a wonderful and vivid account of arctic life during a time of significant change. must be stunning in the original, because even having been translated into english from french (after being translated from inuktitut to french) it's fantastic.

Suvi says

No can do. Definitely interesting, but I'm not able to give this the time it deserves before the end of a reading challenge next Tuesday, and so many more compelling books are waiting for their turn.

Tracy says

I found the language barrier was the most struggle for me while reading. Te glossary was good for telling the meaning for each authentically placed word, but without knowing how to phonically speak them, it distracted from a smooth flow of concept.

A good read beyond that hiccup though :)

Maia says

In reading the English translation, I couldn't help but think that the original must have had a more flowing quality. As ethnography, I found it to be a fascinating read. I greatly enjoyed the descriptions of kayaks and their use in hunting.

Jennifer says

This book is like nothing I've ever read. The first novel ever written in Inuttitut syllabics, it is the story of an Inuit family as their lives collide with an increasing presence of Qallunaat -- the white people. Nappaaluk was an educator and author who was dedicated to preserving Inuit culture her entire career. But this isn't just anthropology, it's a novel, and it tells as much about the worldview of its characters through its tone and style as it does its recounting of meal preparation, igloo making, etc.

Certainly an example of polar fiction, though considerably different from the other novels I've put on that shelf so far.

Sandra Bunting says

Brilliant! Relates a story of the Inuit before they settled in communities, a simple yet tough life -but so close to nature and the rhythm of the seasons.

You may also enjoy this humorous film by the NFB

https://www.nfb.ca/film/qallunaat_why...

Alex says

Jennifer D says: "just wanted to mention this book to you...because of its context in the history of the novel. the introduction is fascinating and talks about the process of getting the inuit oral tradition transcribed... then understood and translated."

Jennifer is right, I'm super into this. Thank you friend!

Chris says

This is a different type of novel. The plot of the novel is life, and the point of the novel is illustrating the life of a people as opposed to simply a life of person. The title character, Sanaaq, is a widowed mother who, along with her family, deals with everyday life and changing circumstances. It is not a “first people met the white man” novel though religion and modern society do play a role towards the end of the book.
Because of this it is a rather good book. It is a look at culture by a person who lives in that culture and wants to educate about that culture. But it is not education in terms of lecture and now that I think of it, relating seems to be a better word than educate. Regardless, the novel is done in such a way that the characters seem they can – well – walk off the kindle screen in my case.
There is one problem with the Kindle edition. It would be easier for the reader if the words were linked to the glossary.

Deanna McFadden says

The narrative structure of this novel was wholly refreshing and fascinating at the same time. The linear quality of the novel wasn't so much defined by its plot but, rather, by the life of the Inuit family in Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk's wonderful book. The seasons, the constant push forward for food, the necessity of life in such a harsh environment--these make for riveting reading. But it's more than that, it's being wholly immersed in a different world. Of life in the north. Of the strength and determination of the book's narrator, Sanaaq. I am sure I am romanticising the novel, but I also hope that I am appreciating the will of her character--there's

little extraneous to her life. But there's also a sense of community, of sisterhood, and of storytelling that felt redemptive to me. Pieces of this life that felt utterly foreign, especially the episode of spousal abuse and its consequences, but common threads to my own life, motherhood, for one, helped keep me connected to the story.

Desmond Beddoe says

This novel is not a novel in our literary structural sense but a beautiful insight into the Inuit culture and way of life that although part of this northern nation is perhaps the least understood. The episodes laid out are simple in language structure but complex in story. The reader is immersed into the intimate nomadic lives of the Inuit families as they deal with the daily and seasonal struggles of survival, nature and the encroaching southern white people. There are customs and attitudes that are difficult to appreciate in our present day urban life styles however I felt there was an underlying desire to reach out across the divide and bind the stories to the universal mosaic of ordinary lives dealing with life, its challenges and its spiritual world. Through the eyes of Sanaaq, a strong and outspoken Inuit widow we are told tales of danger, survival, loss and birth. The stories are primarily told with a lightness and transparency but also at times with a complexity that confounds our sense of societal understanding. Sanaaq and her young family represent the heart and soul of the Canadian narrative, their history forged and still shapes our story. I highly recommend this book for many reasons, enjoyment, historical relevance, structure, and the sense that our lives are intertwined with the story tellers of our past. Pull up to a flame, feel the cold of the snow hut and share a tea with Sanaaq.

Morgan Dhu says

Saanaq, by Inuk author Mitiarjuk ?Nappaaluk, has been called the first 'Canadian Inuit novel.' Written over a period of two decades, first in Inuktitut syllabics (published in transliteration in 1984) and later translated into French (published in 2002) and English (2014), it was commissioned by Catholic missionaries working in Nunavut, who wanted to improve their ability to communicate with the indigenous peoples living in the region. What they asked for was a simple phrasebook. What Nappaluk began writing was an episodic novel that, in telling stories about the Inuit people and their lives, served not only as a reading primer but a record of indigenous life in Nunavut and the arrival of Europeans in the area, from the rarely-heard perspective of an indigenous woman.

it is written very simply, in prose that reminds me very much of the storytelling style I've encountered in some other works by indigenous people (some of the short stories of Thomas King cone to mind), and it's a series of short pieces detailing bith the daiky activities and special events of a small, interconnected community of Inuit. The connecting thread is the relationships of all the characters to Saanaq, a young widow who, at the beginning of the novel, lives with her younger unmarried sister and daughter. The time period is somewhere in the middle of the 20th century - the community knows of Europeans, but they have not yet been significantly affected by their arrival in the North, and still live as their ancestors did.

The story behind the novel's creation took many twists and turns. As anthropologist Bernard Saladin d’Anglure - then a post-graduate student working with Claude Levi-Strauss - says in his Introduction,

"... the novel took almost twenty years to write, for several reasons. The first part covered a little over half of the final manuscript. It stopped at the beginning of episode 24 (The Legend of Lumaajuq) because the author

had to leave for a long stay at a hospital in the South and then because Father Lechat [the priest who had originally asked Napaaluk to write the phrasebook - bibliogramma] had been transferred to Kuujjuaq (Fort Chimo). Father Joseph Méeus, O.M.I., took over supervision of her work and about forty new pages were written, i.e., episodes 25 to 37. The novel continued to remain unfinished with her return to hospital and the transfer of Father Méeus to another village. Mitiarjuk stopped writing for several years.

I met Father Lechat in January 1956 during my first stay in Arctic Quebec. He welcomed me to Kuujjuaq, offering the hospitality of his mission, and told me about the novel Sanaaq. In his hands was the first part, written in pencil with almost nothing crossed out or added. It had been transliterated into Roman letters, with the author's help, before he had left Kangirsujuaq, and had also been partially translated. But the spelling of the Inuit language had not yet been standardized and the imprecision of syllabic writing, the lack of punctuation, and the distance from the author made the job impossible for him to pursue. He read me some of the translation and my interest was aroused right away. It was not until 1961 that I finally met Mitiarjuk, during anthropological fieldwork at Kangirsujuaq. I convinced her to start writing again. The next year Father Lechat gave me his manuscript of Sanaaq so that I could work on it with Mitiarjuk."

It was through d'Anglure's ongoing assistance and contacts (and access to academic funding) that the book saw publication. (He used the experience of working with Napaaluk as the basis for his Ph.D dissertation.)

I was struck, in reading this, by the strong sense of community among the families whose stories are included in the novel. They support each other, feed each other, join in hunting and gathering firewood and other resources for each other. Napaaluk describes a life that is semi-nomadic - the community changes their camp's location several times - and focused on subsistence. Food is not just for nourishment, it plays an important social function - when people come to visit each other, they are offered 'arrival meals' as welcome to the new community, and 'going-away meals' when leaving, as recognition of the effort and use of energy in travelling in a difficult landscape. And when someone has been successful in hunting or fishing, it's often the signal for a community feast, with everyone invited to share in the meat from the kill. There are several occasions where hunters and fishers give part of their catch to the elders of the community, because they are not always able to find food for themselves.

In one chapter, in which several elders share legends, there is an exchange which I found unintentionally ironic, and deeply saddening. One if the young hunters, whose parents are dead, is instructed by an elder on how to identify animals that are healthy and thus safe to kill and eat. The young hunter and the elder talk about the role of elders in preserving the knowledge of the people:

"Thank you! I won't forget any of what you've told me and which I didn't know before. I need to be taught. Those who aren't elders are less knowledgeable than those who are. Without elders the Inuit are nothing, for there is much knowledge that the elders alone possess!"

"My knowledge comes not from me but from my ancestors. It seems to be mine but, in fact, it comes to me from people who preceded me. I pass it on to all of you, to all of your descendants and all of your kinfolk!"

In the earlier parts of the story, there is little indication of the existence of white Europeans, beyond the use by hunters of guns. As the novel progresses, contacts with Europeans (called the Qallunaat by Sanaaq's people, literally meaning 'big eyebrows) become more frequently mentioned, until finally, the story records the arrival of Catholic missionaries and the first conversions among Sanaaq's community. In reading these passages, it's impossible to forget that Nappaaluk was herself a convert, who wrote the majority of her novel at the request of, and in consultation with, the Catholic priests who had cone to live in her community.

Later in the story, white 'Inuit agents' arrive, and establish an outpost near the area where Sanaaq's community makes their camp. Sanaaq's second husband accepts a contract job of several month's duration working for the Qallunaat at another place. The Inuit agents establish a system of cash payments to the elderly and to families with children, and later there are regular visits to the outpost from a community health nurse. There is now a store where Sanaaq and her relatives can purchase food, cloth, and other goods. The intervention of the Qallunaat is also of significance to the story when first Sanaaq's young son almost drowns, and later, when Sanaaq experiences a violent battering from her husband which leaves her severely injured. The Qallunaat offer to fly her son out to a hospital if he does not recover - which he does - and then does fly Sanaaq to a hospital for treatment of her injuries. Her husband, meanwhile, is cautioned not to beat her again or he will go to jail.

Personal interactions - even sexual relationships - between Inuit and Qallunaat become part of the story of Sanaaq's community. In the later chapters - those written after Nappaaluk had begun to work with d'Anglure rather than the Catholic priests for whom she had begun her work - there are indications of the beginnings of patterns of abuse of the Inuit by Qallunaat sent into the north, although it's uncertain what Nappaaluk felt about the incidents she included.

In Sannaq, Nappaaluk has given us the gift of an account of traditional Inuit life, and of the beginnings of the relationship between Inuit and white settler-colonists in the North, from the viewpoint of an Inuk woman who witnessed the changes herself. It's a rare and precious gift, and I'm richer for having ben able to read it.

Leah says

Wow. If you're interested in the North and in the Inuit, this is a truly fascinating and recommended read. It gives you a sense of the harshness of life for these people living on the land, and the changes that took place with first contact. At the same time, you get a better sense of the family relations and community support that made it possible to live in such a harsh environment. You really feel the respect, love and humour that permeate these relationships.

The preface is fascinating and makes me wish there were more annotations. Found the glossary at the back a bit cumbersome (the book binding makes the pages uneven and difficult to flip back and forth), but like the fact that it is not completely translated.

Susie says

Ce livre, écrit par une femme inuit raconte la vie quotidienne. Les chasses, la tente, l'igloo, les amis... Deux choses me frappent. Premièrement, contrairement à ce qu'on entend et voit d'habitude, les inuits ne sont pas nécessairement des experts en chasse et pêche. Ils ne tirent pas bien et souvent manquent leur proie plusieurs fois, ils épuisent leur munition à force de mal tirer, ils se noient en pêchant, ils jettent des restants aux chiens quand ils sont attachés au traîneau prêts à partir, les chiens se jettent sur la nourriture et empêtrent les cordes, etc. Bref, ils font beaucoup d'erreurs qui me semblent évitables avec leur expérience. Deuxièmement, le style de ce livre est très "linéaire" dans son écriture - on dit: "ils ne peuvent faire telle chose. Maintenant ils ont réussi." C'est comme si tout est un peu en accéléré - on lit sans qu'il y ait de pose pour reprendre sa

respiration.
Je trouve que la traduction est un peu bizarre. Le style me semble trop sophistiqué pour la façon dont le texte est écrit.

Jennifer says

i am having a hard time rating this book. its importance to the literary canon makes it a 5-star, necessary work. but i felt like there were oddities within the translation, and these kept pulling me out of the book. and, not that it is worth quibbling over, i would not necessarily label this as 'a novel'. it felt much more like each chapter was a vignette, as nappaaluk offers various scenes and activities of inuit life. so it did feel more like reading connected short stories.

a bit of background: in high school i was very fortunate to be able to spend time in a small inuit community on victoria island. though my timing and location are quite different from those of nappaaluk's book, much felt so familiar to me and was quite relatable -- the cadence of the language, the importance of family units, the normal day-to-day of life and existence in a challenging environment, community working together, caring for one another. *sanaaq* created some wonderful reminiscences for me while i read. one difference though, which i would like to note, concerns (view spoiler)

and yet i come back to the translations...inuktitut, to french, to english. the foreword to this edition offers a terrific overview of the process, effort and time; the undertaking was no small feat. but something is sitting oddly for me, and keeps me wondering if the authenticity from nappaaluk has been truly conveyed in appropriate english language (if that even exists?), or altered a little bit to be digested by southern readers? (and to be clear: this is not an issue throughout the book. there is the inclusion of a lot of inuit words, with a list of translations at the back. but every now and then a word or phrase would be used and i would think whatever was originally expressed had been anglicized, and meaning or feeling was lost.)

so i am going to sit on 3½ -stars for now... i did quite like the read, but maybe i just need to process it further, or even read it again?

Ian Carpenter says

A unique read that's not nearly as strange as some of the writing on it suggests. Nappaaluk's short chapters, slices of life at that moment, a hunt gone bad, the impact of domestic violence, storms, the intrusions of priests, are all highly relatable and beautifully written. Yes, there's something different in the way she tells her stories, more verbal, a lack of novelistic concerns and tropes, something a little cyclical in some of the repetitions that start some chapters but its all more felt than anything. Loved immersing in it.

Peter Jiao says

Note to self: the author's life reminds me that there is so much learning that can be accessed outside formal education and training.