

The Other Side of Eden

Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World

by Hugh Brody. North Point Press, 2001. Hardcover, \$25.00. 376 pages.

Reviewed by Gregory Martin

As readers, we approach different genres with different expectations, and approaching nonfiction, especially the nonfiction of social science, we expect to learn. We focus more on subject than style or form, and we don't expect to lose ourselves inside the world of our imagination. But a work that combines the intellectual and aesthetic betrays these expectations and asks more of its readers, asks us to both engage new concepts and surrender to story. As Susan Sontag writes in her essay collection *Against Interpretation*, "Art is not only about something; it is something." For nonfiction to be literary, it must do more than diagnose culture or place a series of events on a historical continuum. To become the "something" of art, it must somehow approach the inexpressible.

The Other Side of Eden is a journey to the Arctic told by a cultural anthropologist who has been studying and documenting the far north and its indigenous peoples for thirty years. Brody's book is an ambitious artistic achievement, a challenge to our notions of what books of nonfiction should look like, and how they should be read and experienced.

The Other Side of Eden skillfully blends the theoretical and the personal, blurring the lines between nonfiction categories. It is anthropology, philosophy of language, even theology—but it is also memoir. Through compelling personal narrative—scene, dialogue, suspense—Brody uses his own experi-

ence to explain crucial differences between agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies, to advocate for indigenous rights, and to describe differing stages of—and efforts to combat—assimilation. In doing so, he makes storytelling useful and instructive.

Through stories of Brody's friendship with an Inuktitut elder, Anaviapik, we learn that the Inuktitut language has no words for swearing or cursing: "With much laughter we translated them into Inuktitut. Anaviapik wondered why Qallunaat [whites] would want to shout about shit or sex when they were angry." Brody explains that for the Inuit, "the strong must conceal bad feelings.... Anaviapik had often seen Qallunaat reveal their anger... and supposed that this want of *isuma*, this childishness, was a result of their being so far from home, in a strange place, and frustrated by the Inuit." Brody draws important distinctions about language, about equanimity and compassion in different cultures, while thoroughly undermining the stereotype of the primitive. "We are all contemporaries," writes Brody, "whatever lands we live on and whatever heritage we rely on to do so. All human beings have been evolving for the same length of time."

But Brody's rendering of his friendship with Anaviapik does more than instruct; it extends beyond usefulness and engages a different form of intelligence, an emotional intelligence. The two men spend weeks together traveling hundreds of miles by dogsled over mountain passes and sea ice, once going five days with little or no food. As readers, we participate in a way of life and an intimacy of friendship achieved through mutual respect and shared hardship. We become as attached to Anaviapik as to a character in the best novel, and when the two men say goodbye for the last time, the loss is the reader's as well as Brody's. What we feel then is not the engagement of learning, but rather a strange combination of melancholy and gratitude.

The form of *The Other Side of Eden* is inventive, with the play and ambition of a novel. Its organizing principle is neither a chronological nor a linear narrative arc. Rather, it is lexical—organized into the six chapters "Inuktitut," "Creation," "Time," "Words," "Gods," and "Mind," and making inquiries into meanings and themes associated with each word. This allows Brody the freedom to move back and forth in time and between peoples and places, exploring and contrasting the vastly different worldviews of hunter-gatherer and agricultural peoples. The book's structure places it in a tradition of formally unconventional literary nonfiction that includes James Agee and Walker Evans famously idiosyncratic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and more recently, James Galvin's *The Meadow*.

The nonlinear form of *The Other Side of Eden* aims, as A. N. Whitehead puts it, "to embody what it indicates," for Brody wants to reveal the inadequacy of linear logic in understanding hunter-gatherer societies. For hunter-gatherers, knowledge is associative, tied to personal and collective memory, to storytelling. The insight of dreams is as essential as knowledge about game trails or weather patterns when making hunting decisions. No clear separation exists between information and intuition, between history and song. Many of the Arctic's indigenous peoples sing their history, and so "behind the words, or within the words, there are meanings that are more akin to poetry or music." These song-histories, like Brody's book itself, evoke for their listeners both an intellectual and an aesthetic response, or rather, for hunter-gatherers, there is no cold distinction between the intellectual and aesthetic, and the experience, like the best art, transcends category. ✎

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