

Ten Creative Books Introduce the North, Inuit and Nunavut to Elementary School Children

Nadine Fabbi

Elementary school teachers and librarians can introduce children to Inuit culture and Northern/Nunavut history by having them read the ten selected books in this article and then enhancing these stories with additional curriculum and lesson plans. Children's literature from the Canadian North is relatively recent with all but one of the suggested books having been published during the 1990s or in the year 2000. All of them are very well written (several are awards winners) and engage the young reader with beautiful, sometimes surrealistic illustrations. Together these books provide: an introduction to Inuit mythology, the history of the Northwest Passage and missionary schools, the importance of the *inukshuk*, and the vital role of the polar bear in Inuit culture. The entire "selection" may be purchased for under \$80 U.S. from Canadian bookstores and comprises a complete library of the Canadian North for children (see ordering information at the end of the article).

Beginning with Northern history, one of the most captivating historical events is the search for the Northwest Passage. While elementary school children may be too young to comprehend the 400-plus year race for the Passage and the vital role it played in opening the West to European "discovery" and settlement, they can certainly begin to imagine the excitement involved in the search even at the kindergarten level. *Zoom Away* (1985) is an award-winning book by Canadian author Tim Wynne-Jones that brilliantly tells the story of the Northwest Passage through a child's eyes. For Zoom, the main character and a pussy cat, North is literally above him in geographic terms. Consequently, when Zoom and his human friend, Maria, decide to go North to search for the lost Franklin expedition, they head up a set of stairs to the top floor of a house. The further up the stairs they climb, the more snow there is and the colder it becomes.

Their search for the Northwest Passage leads them to a tiny door that opens to a long tunnel—the Passage itself. After walking down the tunnel Zoom can see the light at the other end and the world beyond. "Everywhere was ice, glistening and glaring in the bright sun ... "Yahoo!" he cried, "The North Pole." And Zoom goes on to skate to his heart's content on a frozen lake. It is a magical story that younger children will enjoy even as it introduces them to a far more complex history that will serve them well in future social studies classes.

From this key event in Northern history we move to the Inuit people. Much of Inuit history and traditional culture can be taught through the works of Canada's most prolific and popular *Inuk* author, Michael Arvaarluk Kusagak. Kusagak was born in the late 1940s in today's Nunavut and lived a nomadic life with his family that included travel by dog sled and living in igloos during the winter months. Kusagak has written seven books to date, all beautifully illustrated by Vladyana Krykorka, a Czechoslovakian-Canadian artist. Kusagak's books are perfect for teaching about the culture and history of the North as each story depicts Michael's early memories of traditional life and the myths and tales told by his grandmother at bedtime.

A Promise is a Promise, Kusagak's first book co-written with Robert Munsch, is about the *Qallupilluq* (plural, *Qallupilluit*) an imaginary creature, somewhat like a troll, who lives in the Hudson's Bay or resides in icebergs. Wearing women's parkas made of loon feathers, the *Qallupilluit* are grotesque looking and grab innocent children who come too near the shore or stand too close to cracks in the sea ice. The main character in the story is Allashua, a young *Inuk* girl, who disobeys her mother's warning not to fish on the sea ice. Sure enough, she is captured by the *Qallupilluit* and dragged down to

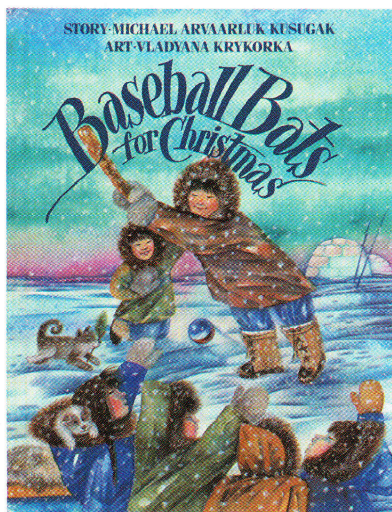
the bottom of the ocean. Allashua barely escapes but must help her mother in tricking the sea monsters in order that she and her siblings are spared their lives.

A Promise is a Promise can be used to teach how the Inuit created stories that would assist in keeping their children safe, particularly given that Inuit families traditionally spent a great deal of time on or near the sea. Once the children read and learn about the *Qullupilluit*, they can make up their own stories to keep each another from danger in their own culture, creating mythology for the purpose of survival as did the Inuit.

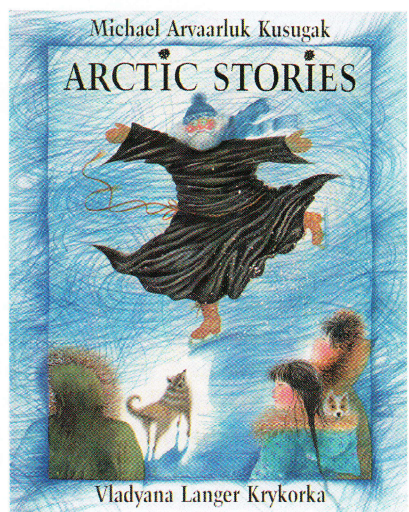
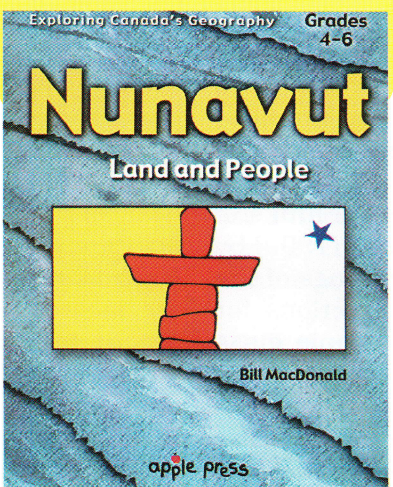
Kusagak's *Baseball Bats for Christmas* (1990), *Northern Lights the Soccer Trails* (1993) and *Arctic Stories* (1998) all illustrate aspects of Northern life. In *Baseball Bats for Christmas* the Inuit children, never having seen a tree, refer to them as "standing ups." When a pilot accidentally leaves a couple of Christmas trees at the Hudson's Bay store, the children chop them up and make baseball bats out of the trunks. This book is a great vehicle for teaching children about the landscape and vegetation in the North, and to introduce them to the concept of the treeline. The treeline is a transitional zone, a few miles in width, north of which trees no longer grow. The traditional homeland of the Inuit is north of the treeline and the homeland of First Nations or Indian people is south of that transitional zone. In fact the political boundary for the new territory of Nunavut, roughly follows the treeline. *Baseball Bats for Christmas* will give children a sense of what life in the barrens actually looks like.

Northern Lights the Soccer Trails teaches children the important role of the northern lights in Inuit culture and how the mythology about the lights was used to comfort those who had lost someone dear. In the story a young girl, Kataujaq, remembers all of the wonderful things she used to do with her mother before her mother suffered from tuberculosis and died. Even as Kataujaq matures, she misses her mother and is, at times, terribly lonely. One night, when Kataujaq is feeling particularly sad, her grandmother tells her a story about the northern lights to comfort her. "People die ... and when they die, their souls leave their bodies and go up into the heavens, and there they live ... when they were on earth, they too liked to play soccer. And, even though they no longer live among us, they still like to play. So, on a clear moonlit night ... you can see them, thousands of them, all running around chasing their soccer ball all over the sky." From then on, when Kataujaq sees the northern lights she also sees her mother in the sky, running around with the rest of the spirits playing soccer. This eases her loneliness. The story can be used to illustrate how myths are commonly used by all cultures to provide comfort and to make sense of the inexplicable. In addition, teachers can build on the story to teach the basic science of the northern lights and why it is that they are unique to the circumpolar regions.

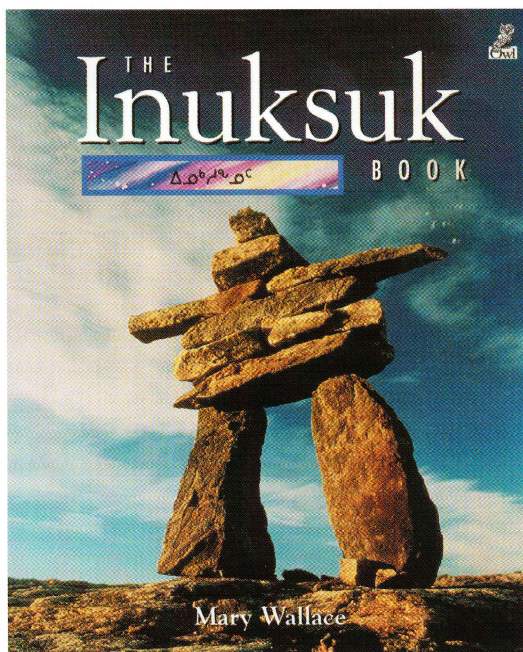
Arctic Stories is a book of three stories about a young girl named Agatha. These stories tell of the first helium-filled aircraft that flew into the North and its impact on the Inuit; the importance of the raven in Northern life and the residential school



The creative story telling and colorful whimsical illustrations in each of these ten books will captivate young readers while teaching many valuable lessons about culture and environment.

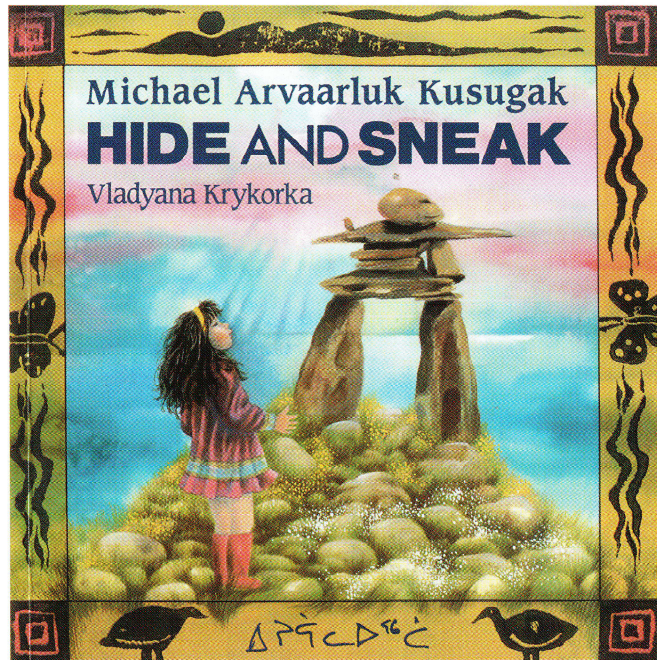


experience. The story about Agatha at the residential school is particularly important in introducing children to a key part of Inuit history. Certainly, almost all children will be able to relate to the fear, loneliness and discomfort of being in a new place for the first time. The Inuit were the last of the aboriginal peoples in North America to be sent to residential schools—it wasn't until the late 50s and early 60s that children were taken away for a year at a time to live with Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Kusagak was so unhappy during his first year at the residential school that when the plane came the following year to pick up the children, he hid in the hills and avoided being taken away. "Agatha Goes to School" is a gentle way to introduce children to a harsh history particularly as Kusagak uses much humor in the story particularly in having the Priest, while showing off his figure skating to the kids, fall into a hole in the ice.



A vital part of Northern culture and one that is intriguing to children is the use of the *inuksuk*. *Inuksuuk* (plural of *inuksuk*) are the rock formations that often resemble a human form. The word means, "thing that can act in place of a human." Inuksuuk have been used for hundreds of years by the Inuit as directionals, caches for food, to warn of danger, etc. An award-winning book on the inuksuk for children entitled, *The Inuksuk Book* (1999) by Mary Wallace explains the many meanings of the rock formations, and comes with directions for building an inukshuk—a fun and simple class activity.

At the back of the book is a complete listing of the *Inuktitut* syllabics with the sounds next to the

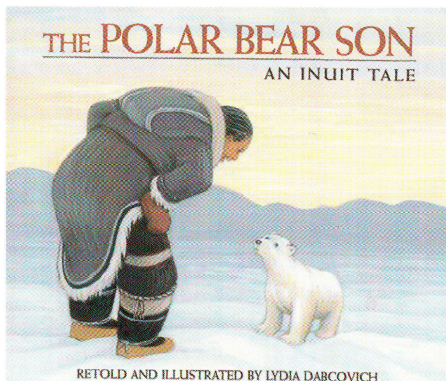


symbols. The alphabet is followed by a listing of common Inuktitut words. Because of the simple sounds indicated by each symbol, children can readily write out their name using the *Inuktitut* alphabet. In no time they will be able to write one another secret messages in Inuktitut—a game that children love and will effectively introduce them to the written language of the Inuit.

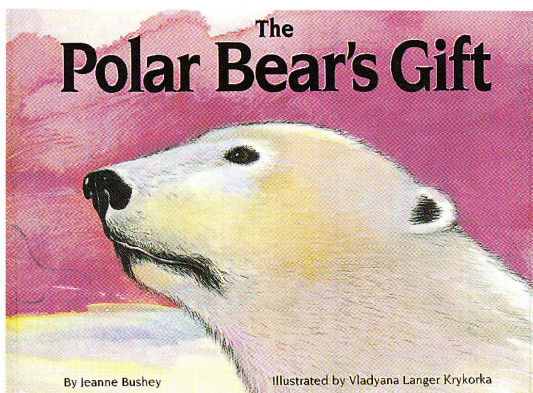
Returning to the symbol of the *inuksuk*, Kusagak has written a story that about the importance of the *inuksuk* to the Inuit. In *Hide and Sneak* (1992) the character from *A Promise is a Promise*, Allashua, spends the entire day outside playing with an imaginary gnome and strays far from home. In the barrens, with no physical markers—hills, trees or buildings—it is easy to get lost. Indeed, Allashua loses her way and has no idea where she is. Finally, far off in the distance, she spots an *inuksuk* and realizes that it is the one near her house. Using the rock formation as a guide, she finds her way back. The story can be used to give children a sense of the vital importance of the *inuksuk* and what a friendly symbol it is in the North—a sign of life, home and community.

Another key part of Inuit life is the role of the polar bear, both for survival and in terms of the special attributes given to the animal. Children love to learn about animals and the polar bear is one of the most interesting animals to study and it is unique to Northern cultures. Polar bears are the largest of all bears. Males can weigh up to 1,600 pounds, but cubs only weigh one to two pounds, or less than a human baby. Teaching about the polar bear is also a good way to introduce children to the

effects of global warming. The polar bear is one of the most threatened of all species today due to the sensitive northern environment and the melting of the ice floes. Today's polar bears are 15% lighter in weight than they were 20 years ago.



The next two beautifully written books give a wonderful sense of the importance of the polar bear to the Inuit people: *The Polar Bear Son: An Inuit Tale* (1997) by Lydia Dabovich and *The Polar Bear's Gift* (2000) by Jeanne Bushey. In *The Polar Bear Son* an elderly Inuk woman finds and raises a polar bear cub who becomes a close companion. When the bear matures he hunts and brings her food but it does not take long for the men of the village to take a hunter's interest in the bear. To protect her "son," the woman chases the bear away but every so often she stands on the edge of the village and claps for him to come back and visit her. This is an incredibly touching story, retold from a popular oral tale, and beautifully illustrated by the author. It tells of the sensitive relationship between animal and human, and illustrates just how much respect the Inuit have for the bears in their midst.



The Polar Bear's Gift is about Pani, a young girl who, like the boys, wants to prove herself by capturing her first bear. When she finds a wounded young polar bear named Nanook, she has to decide whether to wait until he dies and claim that she made her first kill, or to save the cub and return him to his mother. Though Pani wants to be

recognized as a hunter, she decides to nurse Nanook back to health and is rewarded by the mother bear with a magical bag containing a small piece of fur. When Pani takes the bag home, the fur grows into a thick rug that covers the entire igloo floor. This story reveals much about the relationship between the Inuit and polar bears but it is also a powerful moral tale about the honesty, caring and giving.

Finally, there is a first rate workbook on Nunavut that is a must have for anyone teaching about the new territory at the elementary level. *Nunavut: Land and People* (2000), by Bill MacDonald (Grades 4-6) is written specifically for educators. The copyright allows teachers to photocopy the entire book for each class of students. The book is packed with exercises about Nunavut and includes maps, projects, pages to color, puzzles, quizzes, etc. This workbook will teach students just about everything they could know about the new territory. It also includes something of Northern history (the Northwest Passage) and traditional Inuit life.

By using *Zoom Away* by Tim Wynne-Jones, the works of Michael Kusagak, *The Inuksuk Book*, the two stories about polar bears, and the Nunavut workbook, your students will know all of the basics about Northern history and Inuit life and culture. The stories in these books will give students some of the basic social studies structures that can be built upon in the higher grades. Each one of the suggested books tells an engaging story while illustrating and teaching about an important part of life in the North.

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(June 1st and 2nd Michael Kusagak will be in Seattle Washington for a Friday night public reading (\$10.) and as part of an all-day Saturday educator's workshop on the Circumpolar North (\$45.). If you are interested in obtaining tickets for either of these events, contact the Canadian Studies Center at canada@u.washington.edu or 206-221-6374.

All of the suggested books can be ordered from *Kidsbooks* (Vancouver) at 1-800-893-5335. If you have questions about Canadian children's literature, ask for "Maggie." She is a terrific resource. *Kidsbooks* also ships quickly and without prepayment.) 