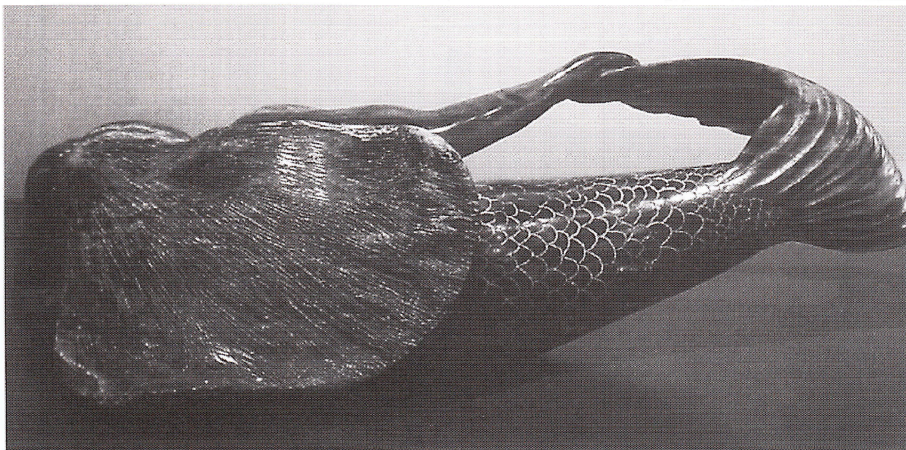


# Retelling the Myth of Sedna

to teach about  
Inuit culture  
and the North

by **NADINE FABBI**



*SEDNA'S STORY IS PART OF THE INUIT ORAL TRADITION and so there are many variations of the tale. In the spirit of the oral tradition and to keep the story more "accurate," I encourage teachers to adapt the myth as it suits their mood, the age of their audience, etc. as that is the way it has been told for centuries. For the purpose of educating students outside the North about Inuit culture and Canadian northern geography, I suggest using maps and setting the story at a particular location as well as including descriptions of wildlife or traditional hunting practices. Storytelling is an excellent way to hold your students' attention and effectively educate them about a particular people or culture. Here is just one version of the story. Again, adapt my version, play with it and above all, make it your own!*

Long, long ago and far, far North on the Island of Baffin, lived an Inuk girl named Sedna and her father. They lived alone or sometimes with a small group of other Inuit. Their lives were quiet and spent doing whatever was necessary to survive and to enjoy their lives. Having no mother or siblings, Sedna learned to do a great many things for herself and she was good at them. She was an expert fisher, she had built a fine kayak with her father, she could sew a pair of seal-skin boots on her own and even build an igloo by herself—just a small one, mind you, but an igloo nonetheless. And everyone seemed to love her. She would throat sing with the other women, play string games with the younger children, and dance at all the parties. It was no surprise that when Sedna became a young woman, almost every young man who met her wanted her as his wife. But Sedna was happy living with her father. She was busy and loved her life and showed no interest in the young men. But one day, something unusual happened.

One morning, Sedna had gotten up particularly early and was taking a walk along the bay at what is now Iqaluit. She spotted a kayak in the distance and watched as a young man paddled towards shore pulling his boat up right next to her but taking no note of her presence. As he was quite close to her, she took a long and good look at him and noticed that while he was rather handsome, he had the largest nose she had ever seen, and pointed too, almost like a beak. She couldn't help it and started to giggle. The young man stopped fiddling with his kayak and looked at her. He was so serious that she immediately stopped giggling. Goodness, big nose or not, he was terribly good looking! Finally he smiled at Sedna, asked where she lived, and followed her back to her father's camp. He stayed with them for a week and during that time told Sedna and her father all sorts of stories about his home, Ellesmere Island. He bragged about his warm tent with a floor thick in polar bear skins, his endless supply of seal oil for light in the winter, and his skill as a hunter. He was trying to impress Sedna, and he did. But her father was very suspicious about this braggart who seemed to have such a good life.



At the end of the week the young man asked Sedna to marry him. She was thrilled, but her father begged her not to marry and leave Baffin. Sedna would not listen. Instead she got the local women to help her build an umiak, a large boat to carry her belongings, and shortly she and the mysterious man made the long trip to Ellesmere Island.

No sooner had they landed on the shores of Ellesmere than Sedna realized that she had been deceived! The tent was made of fish skins, half rotted with big holes that let in the wind. There were no bear skins on the floor, but hard, cold walrus leather. There was no seal oil for the lamps and even if there were, the wind would have blown them out. Sedna turned to confront her husband and was horrified—before her eyes he was transforming into a bird! She jumped back and screamed, but he took no notice. When he was fully transformed, he flew off. Sedna flung herself on the cold walrus leather and began to sob. She thought about all the wonderful young Inuit men on Baffin Island who longed to be her husband and she had refused them all, and now here she was hundreds of miles from home and all alone with a bird-man. And she was cold. And it was the start of winter and getting dark and soon it would be dark day and night and there was no seal oil! She would go crazy. For the entire winter Sedna lived alone in the tent waiting for her bird-husband to bring her rotten fish. It was the longest winter of her life.

The following spring her father made the journey to come visit and found Sedna half starved and shivering with cold. Her bird-husband was out hunting for fish. Sedna's father was furious and told Sedna to gather her things and that he would take her home. As quickly as possible they got into the kayak and started to paddle away. But, no sooner did they start out than the bird-man spotted them and came after the boat flapping his wings so hard that the sea began to swell and the waves threatened to toss the boat upside down. Sedna's father was terrified. He didn't know what else to do and became selfish and offered his daughter back to the bird-man, throwing her out of the boat. Sedna clung to the sides of the boat almost tipping it. Her father took out his hunting knife and cut off the tips of her fingers. These fell into the sea and became the whales and her fingernails turned into whale bones. Sedna now reached up and grabbed the side of the boat with her knuckles. Her father, terrified that the boat would tip or bird-man would kill them both, chopped off the rest of her fingers. These fell into the sea and became the walruses. Sedna grabbed the edge of the boat with what was left of her hands, but these too her father chopped off and, with nothing left to clutch with, Sedna sunk to the bottom of the sea. (For little children, rather than using a knife to cut off her fingers, I say that he used the paddle to hit her fingers or hands and that they just fall off.)

Sedna's father desperately paddled back to Baffin Island. Bird-man, certain that his wife was gone forever, flew back to Ellesmere Island. And Sedna has lived on since as the goddess of the sea. It is she who decides which animals and how many she will allow to die on a given day. And to this day the Inuit offer Sedna treasures, such as the finest meat from their first kill of the season, so that she will release more animals to them.



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***This clever, if somewhat bizarre, Inuit tale, handed down for perhaps thousands of years, will definitely get your students' attention.***