

# Book Reviews

## Traditional Threads

Mara Feeney (Author)

*Rankin Inlet*. Gaby Press

Reviewed for *Canadian Literature* by Jonquil Covello March 2010

One of the most enduring clichés of northern literature is that of the southerner who journeys north, stays a short time, and then returns home as a self-styled northern expert to write about his or her experience and perpetuate certain myths of northern people and the land. Mara Feeney is not one of those writers. While working on a degree in Anthropology in the 1970s Feeney spent her summers in various communities around Hudson Bay. After graduation she worked as a Housing Officer in several Inuit communities. She has used her experience and her intimate knowledge of the Inuit and their land to write her first novel, *Rankin Inlet*.

*Rankin Inlet* is the fictional story of a young British woman who takes a position as a nurse-midwife in the small arctic settlement of Rankin Inlet in the Inuit territory of Nunavut. When Alison arrives in Churchill, Manitoba, on her way north, she is greeted by hoots of laughter and eye rolling when she tells a couple of local civil servants that she is a nurse bound for Rankin Inlet. They warn her of rogue polar bears, drunken Native people and a cold, isolated land lacking the amenities of a civilized society. They also speak disparagingly of a recent Inuit incentive to gain autonomy. "The natives want autonomy - just let 'em try running things themselves," said a "half-stewed patron with a tone that implied of course they would fail." This is 1970, and thirty years later the Inuit have achieved full autonomy and attitudes have changed. The journey towards the creation of the new northern territory underlies Alison's own personal journey and story. The novel begins in 1970 and ends in 1999, the year that Nunavut was established as an official territory. Feeney constructs a story of change, love, tragedy, identity, and cultural adjustment. Her multivocal technique invokes flashbacks, letters and personal reminiscences that replicate traditional oral story telling in which people gather to relate and share their memories, their stories, and their hopes for the future. The lack of a clear, central narrative authority allows a multi-voiced social performance that permits Inuit voices to speak for themselves about the cultural changes and social issues that have confronted them throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Alison marries into an Inuit family and with her hunter husband, Ivaluk, raises four children, one of whom becomes a lawyer and political activist, and another an engineer. The youngest daughter, Ukaliq, remains in Rankin Inlet designing traditional Inuit clothing. Through the eyes of Alison's children, Feeney portrays a sense of how the Inuit are adapting to the future as proud citizens in their re-created homeland of Nunavut. By 1999 the internet has come to Nunavut and the novel ends with Ukaliq's email to her cousin, Ellen, in England telling her what thoughts and hopes she has for the new millennium and the new territory. Appropriately, "Earthlink" is the name of Ellen's email provider and it is significant that Ukaliq and other young Inuit now view themselves as part of a global family no longer isolated from the people and problems of the rest of the world. They are, as Nikmak, Alison's elderly father-in-law notes, "intertwined and braided together like a rope, stretching from the past into the future."

*Rankin Inlet* is a fresh and genuine piece of writing. Although I am not familiar with Inuktitut or the modern English vernacular of Inuit young people, my Inuk friend, Rassi, says that the dialogue is authentic and believable. The book will appeal to anyone with an interest in Inuit culture and contemporary issues faced by young Inuit.