

SYNOPSIS:  
RANKIN INLET: A NOVEL

*Rankin Inlet* is a novel set in an isolated community on the west coast of the Hudson Bay, in Arctic Canada. The main characters are a British nurse-midwife who has been posted to the Rankin Inlet Nursing Station and a traditional Inuit hunter and his family, who are struggling to adjust to modern living conditions. The novel begins in 1970 and ends in 1999, but through a series of stories and flashbacks, it touches on many of the substantial cultural changes that the Inuit of northern Canada have confronted and adapted to throughout the twentieth century.

The 78,000-word novel is structured in three parts. Part I is titled Keewatin, which was the name the Canadian government formerly used for this administrative region of the Northwest Territories (based on a Cree Indian word meaning “north wind”). The novel opens with the voice of Nikmak, as he sits in the Rankin Inlet Nursing Station at the bedside of his adult daughter, Kublu, who is in a coma. Nikmak is distraught, and, not knowing what else to do, he tries to reach his daughter by singing traditional Inuit songs to her--until the head nurse orders him to be quiet because he is disturbing other patients. He then beseeches his daughter not to die, because the whole family needs her, but especially her young baby, Radar. As Nikmak visits the Nursing Station daily over the following week, he tells his daughter a series of stories about the remarkable challenges her people have endured, from the time before his birth up to the present (1970). His stories are interwoven with the voices of two other characters—Alison, the nurse-midwife who has come from Liverpool, and Ivaluk--Nikmak’s middle son. We see the community and its residents through Alison’s fresh eyes and her diary entries, and we learn about the issues and challenges facing young adults in the community through a series of letters that Ivaluk writes to his adopted younger brother, Thomasie, who is away at the boarding school in Churchill, Manitoba. As the plot progresses, the lives of these three individuals become completely entwined. Kublu does not survive, and her death causes a ripple of grief in the community. Alison falls in love with Ivaluk and wonders if she has lost her mind, as well as her heart. Nikmak adapts, as he always has, to loss and death and change.

Part II, entitled Transitions, covers events that happen in the north and in the lives of the main characters between 1970 and 1999. Alison and Ivaluk marry, have children, and struggle to find ways to keep a roof over their heads and food on their table. Telephone, television, motorized vehicles, and paved roadways arrive in the community. The couple survives numerous tests--infidelities, bouts of depression, and several tragedies, including the death of Ivaluk’s mother (Nikmak’s wife) and the suicide of his elder brother Sakku. A new voice is added in this part—that of Thomasie, who graduates from school and goes to work for the Inuit Tapirisat in Ottawa. He becomes swept up in the Inuit self-determination movement and plays a key role in the native land claims settlement negotiations. Through his letters home to Ivaluk, we learn about key political changes that take place both nationally and internationally and ultimately lead up to the biggest indigenous peoples’ land claims settlement in history, including the Canadian

Parliament's decision to form a new territory encompassing one-fifth of Canada's land mass to serve as an Inuit homeland.

Part III, entitled Kivalliq (the Inuit name for the former Keewatin Region), is set in 1999, the year the Northwest Territories split into separate Indian and Inuit regions and the new Nunavut territory was formed. We witness this event through the eyes of the local people. Nikmak confronts growing old; Alison is afflicted with breast cancer and self-doubts; Ivaluk engages in the battle he has always yearned to have with a polar bear--except that it does not go the way he had planned it. Nikmak's eyesight and hearing begin to fail him; Alison loses a breast; Ivaluk loses most of one of his legs. Yet somehow these characters marshal the strength to persevere, accept life's trials, and move forward. As in Part II, there is a new voice added in Part III—the voice of Okalik, Alison and Ivaluk's youngest daughter. Through her, we learn about what has become of her siblings and cousins, the issues that are faced by the youngest generation of adults in contemporary times, and their hopes on the eve of a new millennium.