

***White Lies about the Inuit.* By John L. Steckley. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2008. 168 pp. Bibliography, index.**

One should never judge a book by its cover. Unfortunately, this book is blessed with one of the worst cover designs I've ever seen. Two dolls—their identity could be Norwegian or Nova Scotian or anything in between—left me fearing I had received a cheap novel from a Whitehorse drugstore. The key to their identity—"Alaska SeaLife Center Eskimo Dolls"—is buried on the back cover. The book deals with lies generated in and about the Canadian Arctic. The relevance of Alaskan dolls escapes me.

This is a sad introduction to what is otherwise an engaging, interesting, and provocative read. Before I forget, there is one more annoying anomaly diverting the reader's attention. I was reminded, at the outset of each chapter, of the perturbing practice to which some professors are inclined, of specifying what students will learn by taking their course or wading through an assigned text. Every chapter of *White Lies* comes with a list of things I will be able to do after reading the insights found therein. They include a list of content and discussion questions and key terms used, serving to remind me of my dissonance should a critical reading suggest insights other than those framed by the author. The text is clearly meant to catch a post-secondary student market. I suspect all of us—instructors and students alike—would enjoy the excursion far better if the tour guides were left behind.

White Lies about the Inuit walks us through a number of well-known controversies about what is or is not true about Inuit. *En route*, it both savages and praises the perpetrators and pundits dealing with nose rubbing, female infanticide, wife sharing, Arctic hysteria, Elder suicide, words for snow, the meaning of "Eskimo" and finally, thanks to the efforts of Peter Irniq, the International Olympic Committee's confusion of *Inunnguait* (Steckley almost gets the spelling right) with *Inuksuit* (which Steckley mistakenly spells as "Inukshuit"). The discussion of *Inuksuit* and *Inunnguait*—a person-shaped cairn that some Elders maintain denotes a death or murder—comes at the very end of the text. This late addition suggests a far more interesting and relevant cover.

Steckley also "has a go" at four *Qallunaat* who, when it comes to Arctic lies, myths, intrigue and, in the case of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, unbridled ego and self-promotion, deserve our attention. Franz Boas and Farley Mowat get mixed reviews. However, Diamond Jenness emerges as a studious, conscientious, and level-headed soul amid what are otherwise soothsayers and shameless purveyors of self-interest.

Steckley makes it abundantly clear that he has little use for postmodern theorists and apologists. He aims for “the truth,” noting that “truth is not a popularity contest” (8). I’m not unsympathetic to the effort but, keeping in mind that no one can divest oneself of the biases that identify all of us, Steckley’s own prejudices are more than obvious.

On the one hand, it is refreshing to see someone take aim at Franz Boas, who far too often emerges in the anthropological literature as the patron saint of the discipline. Steckley joins Ken Harper—author of *Give Me My Father’s Body*—in indicting Boas for faking the funeral of Qissuk, an Inuk brought to the New York Museum of Natural History after Boas was appointed assistant curator in 1896. This was reportedly done to appease Qissuk’s son, Minik, while the body was dissected and the skeleton put on display.

On the other hand, Steckley describes Diamond Jenness as “a northern gem” (38) and takes a shot at my sometimes co-author, Peter Kulchyski, and the treatment of Jenness in his 1993 essay, “Anthropology in the Service of the State: Diamond Jenness and Canadian Indian Policy” (*Journal of Canadian Studies*, 28:2). I am not unsympathetic to Steckley calling postmodern criticism “obscuring sediment” (42). It often strikes me as a lazy academic pursuit requiring little more than paper, a pen, and an imagination disturbed by too much good wine. Nevertheless, there is merit in considering the importance of text *and* the distemper of socio-political and economic times in the making of history. If Steckley is critical of Kulchyski’s failure to locate Jenness within the cultural and social norms of his historical moment, can the same logic excuse what Steckley identifies as Boas’ disregard, in the late 1800s, for “the Other”?

Here is Jenness (1962) dealing with whether or not housing should be provided to Inuit on the basis of need rather than ability to pay:

In short, to invest heavily in costly housing, however necessary for Eskimo health, seems to me to be placing the wrong horse in the lead ... A sickly population living in snow houses, with high infant mortality but high morale, is better than a demoralized, degraded population of indigents in fine palaces. (Letter from Diamond Jenness to Dr. J.H. Willis, Ottawa, 1962, Oct. 12. Library and Archives Canada. RG 29, Vol. 2978, File 851-5-4, pt. 1)

A gem indeed! Kulchyski’s observation that Jenness was deeply complicit in a state agenda of assimilation and the proffering of values causing Aboriginal Canadians pain, misery, and suffering can hardly be dismissed by making Jenness a “man of his time and class.” Steckley’s portrayal of

Jenness as “sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those around him” (43) simply doesn’t fit the archival record.

Steckley takes on “the myth” of Inuit elders heading onto the ice to die in order that they not become a burden to those left behind. His claim that Inuit Elder suicide has been portrayed— particularly by Farley Mowat—in emotional, evocative, and by implication less than honest ways, has considerable merit. However, Steckley confuses the way Elder suicide has been portrayed and its relevance to a modern problem among Inuit youth, with whether it was a “not uncommon way” for Inuit Elders to end their lives. In dozens of interviews I conducted with Elders in the 1990s, *Ingminiiqattarniq*—“to do away with oneself”—was frequently mentioned. To suggest that these Elders—including Irniq, whose quote from a paper on young Inuit suicide I wrote with a colleague (“*Isumagijaksaq*: Mindful of the State: Social Constructions of Inuit Suicide.” *Social Science & Medicine* 58: 2625-36) is criticized—are merely mouthing myths White folk have established for Inuit culture, is dismissive of Elders not inclined toward White portrayals of Inuit culture or history.

Asen Balikci’s take on the “whys” of Inuit Elder suicide may, as Steckley notes, be questionable. But his observations on the frequency with which older Inuit took their lives, given the time he spent in the field, deserve more than the short-shrift Steckley gives them.

Perhaps what is needed is what Zebedee Nungak and Inuit filmmaker Zacharius Kunuk have suggested: an Inuit-run “Institute of Qallunaatology.” One of its first undertakings might be an inquiry into how elderly Canadians might choose to end their lives were it not for the admonishments emanating from a Judeo-Christian tradition and a medical profession given to mastering nature by preserving life beyond all reason. Take these elements away and, in the presence of pain and suffering, hypothermia becomes a dignified, common sense, and entirely reasonable way of saying goodbye. Had Steckley interrogated his own culture, he might have come to different conclusions about the wisdom of Inuit Elders.

The book is well-worth reading. Steckley’s treatment of the fantasy of the blond Eskimo is well-considered. His treatment of twenty (or is it fifty-two?) words for snow is entertaining and the context within which he locates myths and controversies well-articulated. He covers a lot of ground. It’s too bad about the cover under which he has done it.

Frank Tester, School of Social Work, University of British Columbia, and Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba