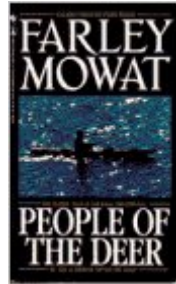




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People Of The Deer (Seal Books)



Synopsis

THEY WERE IN HARMONY WITH THE LAND BUT THEY WERE ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTIONSixty years ago, the Ihalmiut numbered 7,000. When Farley Mowat visited them, their population had dwindled to forty. For two years, Mowat shared their hard life--the bleak winters, the shortages of food, the fervent struggle to withstand the intrusion of white men--and came to understand them. Here, Farley Mowat indicts those who have abused the Ihalmiut. But, foremost, he pays tribute to the last of the People of the Deer--the proud, valiant Eskimos, desperately trying to survive.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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First published in 1947 and available in a wide variety of editions since then, Farley Mowat's first and most distant book is still remarkably readable in the world of the 21st century. It concerns one of the stranger human sagas of the last century, that of the discovery and destruction of a remote Inuit society, the Ihalmiut, in Canada's north. The setting of the book is far enough away in time for us to marvel at how little things have changed since. The contemptuous attitude of European man for the aborigine seems hardly to have altered over the years. We are still hard put to understand the

needs of the first peoples and how to answer them. Farley Mowat has combined a fine sensitivity for the natural environment with a sharp eye for the details of man's place within it. It must be exceedingly rare in the history of anthropology that such an inexperienced investigator has taken such pains to get to the source of his information. Mowat lived among the Ihalmiut for over a year to write the book. During that time he witnessed the rapid deterioration of the small group which remained, and tried to examine the causes of their decline. With very deft prose for such a young writer, he points out the difference between the intentions and the actions of the European discoverers of The People (as they refer to themselves) and the consequences of such disparity. The Ihalmiut were exploited in much the same way as any other tribal band found wandering by the early explorers. However, as Mowat points out, this was an exceptional group which had survived the extreme rigours of a barren land (known to us simply as The Barrens) for so many generations, only to be felled by contact with the very race which might have provided them with so much assistance. The Ihalmiut are long gone from their homeland but their story serves to remind us of our often difficult relationship with the land and the people on it. Perhaps, as a race of city-dwellers, we need to consider our place in the natural environment more than ever. Mowat's work is a just accounting of where we stand in relationship to nature. Nor does he suggest that we should all go and live in the tundra. Yet *People of the Deer* is a source of considerable inspiration for those now ready to reflect on the unbalancing effect of contemporary values.

This first person account was written in the late 40s and published in 1952. The style is closer to Victorian than modern. Each sentence paints an item, and each paragraph completes a landscape. Don't expect Hemingway. But since I grew up reading everything I could find in bookcases inherited from my grandparents, I enjoy Farley Mowat's style. This was his first book about the People. The story is sad - so sad that the reader must put down the book every now and then to get back to the present. Mowat wrote a follow-up to the story of the People, "*The Desperate People*", published in 1959. The style fits our modern age better, but the story of the People gets worse. Be sure to buy and read both.

When published in 1951 this book was a cry for help - not just to help the Ihalmiut but to help ourselves. A well crafted book of one man's understanding, in a limited way, of the hard, harsh life of the Eskimos who live along side the deer, the lakes, and the spirits of the Barrens. The book is full of his memories, some sad, some wonderful. We get images of summer, with its life, the birds, eggs, and kids going out with toy slings to help gather food. We learn about the way the People

lived, worked, and loved inside their families and society. We hear their tales of where they came from, how the animals were brought into the world by a woman, and how dangerous it is for men, both to their body and their soul, when they are all alone. Once there were thousands of them - sharing their tools, enjoying the raw meat of the kill, enjoying the happiness of never needing anything. Wonderful. Depressing. Sad. Lovely. Is there anything we can still do about this? Is there anything we can do for ourselves?

About 75% of this book is fascinating - specifically the sections that are his firsthand accounts and observations of living with People of the Deer. Mowat isn't a trained historian or cultural anthropologist so the parts where he tries to translate the "People's" myths and legends are a lot less interesting. Also of interest are his biologist's view of the arctic landscape.

I was asked to read this book for a class and while I didn't enjoy it, I found this book to be charming and an altogether good read. It reads like a work of fiction, and definitely conveys stunning and other-worldly environments that seemed to be taken out of a Tolkien novel. I read Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy when this book was assigned and I found similarities between the environmental descriptions in those books (especially those in Red Mars) remarkably similar to those found in Mowat's volume. But what makes this book so impressive is that it isn't fiction, but an expression of a reality that, sadly, no longer exists and offers intriguing questions about the state's involvement in the lives of indigenous people. Very good, read it if you get the chance.

People of the Deer tells the story of the meeting between white man and an innocent people, the Ilhamuit, of the Barrenlands of northern Canada. White man and the bureaucracy of the Canadian government destroyed a people, an entire ecosystem and countless wild animals by a fatal combination of greed, ineptitude and arrogance. As an Australian, I recognize similar causes of the decimation of the Australian Aboriginal way of life. Beautifully written, this book was hard to put down, while being both depressing and inspiring.

If you've read any of Farley Mowat's books, this one will excite you as much as any of the others. If you've wondered how Mowat became attached to the Northlands and its people, People of the Deer will show you how it all began. This book also introduces us to a people that have all but lost their land and their way of life.

Mowat is passionate about the fate of these people. He writes convincingly. Hard to put the book down.

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