

***Irene Avaalaaqiaq/Myth and Reality.* By Judith Nasby.
(Montréal, MacGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 129,
map, illustrations, photographs, appendices, ISBN
0-7735-2440-1.)**

F. Mark Mealing

Volume 25, Number 2, 2003

Language and Culture / Langue et culture

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/008061ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/008061ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Mealing, F. M. (2003). Review of [*Irene Avaalaaqiaq/Myth and Reality.* By Judith Nasby. (Montréal, MacGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 129, map, illustrations, photographs, appendices, ISBN 0-7735-2440-1.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(2), 252–255. <https://doi.org/10.7202/008061ar>

indeed of any kind of stratification. Is life essentially the same in its major outlines for all of us? Housing at the crisis end of the spectrum — low income, homeless and temporary shelter — is not in this book, neither is the upper end of architecture — the singular, elegant exercises found in the magazines. This is a book about the middle region of housing that is built without a lot of critical attention, and in which most of us live.

Stephanie White
University of Calgary

Irene Avaalaaqiaq/Myth and Reality. By Judith Nasby. (Montréal, MacGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 129, map, illustrations, photographs, appendices, ISBN 0-7735-2440-1.)

Irene Avaalaaqiaq was born about 1936-1941, an Inuk of Harvatormiuq group of Barren Ground peoples; she came to Baker Lake with her adoptive family in the 1950's to escape famine, married here in 1956 and became a graphic and textile artist now of international renown. Nasby engages Avaalaaqiaq through an essay compiling excerpts from Avaalaaqiaq's memoirs with skilled commentary composed from ethnographic (especially from Rasmussen's 1931 report on the Fifth Thule Expedition), administrative, historical and art specialist's resources to broaden context for the reader. Nasby follows Avaalaaqiaq's plain style, but the choice of illustrations supplements Avaalaaqiaq's graphics with a balance of ethnographic photos, family and community images, and some stark landscapes. These supply not only information but mood.

Avaalaaqiaq's memoirs, developed at Nasby's request, are disarmingly fluent, matter-of-fact accounts, usually of personal and community experience, in which she describes food, hunger, hunting, family matters, and relates her experience to her art. Among these accounts she states in plain language the myths upon which her graphics and wall-hangings are based. Nasby declares

Myth and reality intersect as [Avaalaaqiaq] translates multilayered stories, transformation scenes, and personal memories into bold graphic imagery... manipulating bold shapes in bright contrasting colours against a solid background to represent her world in a symbolic manner (3-4).

Baker Lake is Canada's only major inland Arctic settlement and is known for its sculpture, wall hangings, stone cuts, serigraphs, stencil prints, and coloured pencil drawings. Each artist expresses a singular vision, rooted in tradition and history, while living in the midst of a world affected by present and future technologies.

Baker Lake was developed as a social services centre, in Federal response to the current famine, a consequence of the cyclic bloom and decline of the staple caribou population. For a native economy transformed from trade to wage principles, Federal officials conceived the development of traditional Inuit arts into sources of income. Probably first developed by James Houston and George Swinton, this fruitful policy proved viable; further, it enhanced community self-image and demonstrated the vigour of native traditions offered to an urbane market, old wine put successfully into new bottles. We may recall the brief undermining of the sculpture market in the late 1950's by Asian imitations, to which the Inuit and their advisors responded by developing new media, stone prints for one, superbly and smoothly blending primal and European technologies.

Avaalaaqiaq's memoirs discuss her images, usually as a story or a reminiscence of a story. Her style is a skillful representation of natural speech; her rhetoric, whether oral or literary, is refined. She can take a grim chronicle rhythm or a jocular tone with equal laconic precision.

The years of 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961 I was bearing children. Nancy was born in 1958. Basil was born in 1959 and another one in 1960 and Itiblooie (Elizabeth) was born in 1961 and Norman was born in 1962 and in 1963 another girl named Mary Amarook was born who died after a few months. Peter was born in 1963. Another one that didn't live was born in 1965. Rita Jorah was born in 1966 but only lived a couple of months. My youngest daughter, Susan, was born in 1967. I also have two adopted children, Evelyn, who was born in 1974, and Marvin in 1976 (29, 49).

Sometimes when a husband and wife are walking on the tundra, it is so quiet. Sometimes if they are not talking to each other, the husband will try to make his wife jump or the wife will try to make her husband jump, for fun, jokingly. Avaalaaqiaq recounts her vocation:

I started thinking that I should draw something to show people what my grandmother used to talk about. There was a piece of white cloth and it was the size of a short piece of paper. At that time the Arts and

Crafts programs were just starting to operate. I was thinking of a story my grandmother told me, so I drew a ptarmigan with human heads on it. She said that animals used to transform into humans and there were caribou that were called iyirag. With a black pencil I made an outline on the cloth. At that time there wasn't even embroidery thread available. I used a black thread to sew it. I presented it to the Area Administrator for him to see. Of course he was surprised to see a ptarmigan with human heads on it. He said, "Show it to the arts and crafts officer and probably something will come of it" (33).

It did.

Avaalaaqiaq produces drawings, stencil prints and textile wall hangings, principally the latter. Favoured colours are red, black, white, deep blues and earth ochres. The latter are usually embroidered wool duffle and felt, sometimes with stroud. The figures, stitched with fine black thread and their borders usually outlined by course chainstitching worked by hand, appear in profile or frontally. The overarching theme of the imagery is transformation, mostly between animal and human forms, complicated by opposing isolation and threat to escape and help from spirits and animals.

Borders, as in Figures 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 26 and 27, are almost always loaded with chains of figures (or at least their heads). Apart from Nasby's commentary, the field of visualization appears to represent the artist's memory. Perhaps the borders of the textiles are one boundary between the physical Tundra and the Mind. This is an art of the mind, fed by myth and expressing, however consciously or unconsciously, an indigenous psychology. Certainly Avaalaaqiaq represents myth, and material and historical realities as equivalent aspects of one thing, a view Western people regrettably neglect.

In "Husband and Wife" (47-49), the two central humans, isolated on the Barrens by nightfall, change themselves, with the help of gathering ravens, into animals as the darkening rocks become dubious human and animal heads. In "Spirit Figures" (51-53), two shamanic initiates, great faces appearing on their bodies, attempt to escape from the border of blind heads by turning into birds. Avaalaaqiaq comments wryly, "The boys are cousins. This is a true story but since it's on a wall hanging it's hard to believe and understand." Of "Giant Transforming" (59), in which the central woman, surrounded by glaring, gaping heads of humans and birds, is changing into birds while great faces appear on her hips, Avaalaaqiaq explains:

A giant woman was walking around at sunrise when the red heads in the border started making fun of her. She told them, "Don't make fun of me, I have power to do anything." The faces on her legs started shouting at the red heads. When her arms and legs turned into birds, these birds told the giant she could only escape by flying (94-95).

At this point we are nicely caught between myth, vision or dream and personal history. Avaalaaqiaq does not suggest that this is a traditional story, and it is dangerously tempting to imagine it as a reflection upon projected doubt of herself and her art. But what is essential is the giant woman's response "I have power to do anything."

For folklorists, the book offers a varied feast. As a teaching as well as personal resource, it informs issues such as adaptation, cultural perception and cross-cultural communication, social history, indigenous autobiography, state/indigenous relations, and the provocative movement of expression between narrative and graphic media. I have suggested that the mode of expression is also significant for cross-cultural psychological study. The title thesis, adequately justified by the content, raises obvious metaphysical issues of perception and statement. Nasby and Avaalaaqiaq have together given us a book that informs on many levels while beguiling the mind with images that rise from very deep places. For me, this is its great virtue, to introduce us again to language and stories of Inuit perception, and thus to remind us that we need all the ways of knowing.

Reference

Swinton, George. 1965. *Eskimo Sculpture*. Toronto, MacLelland & Stewart.

F. Mark Mealing
Kaslo, British Columbia

Whistling Banjoman: George Hector. By Anne Fawcett. (Gagetown: Otnabog Editions, 1999. Pp 124, ISBN 0-9685999-0-7, pbk.)

Anne Fawcett's biography of George Hector is a story that tells us of one of New Brunswick's most well-known and respected country musicians of the twentieth century. A local musician who was influential in developing the country music scene of the East Coast, Hector is celebrated for his work in community events, radio, and later television.