

## Neither Savage nor Noble

Neal Pollack

### A DREAM IN POLAR FOG

Yuri Rytkheu

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Yuri Rytkheu's *A Dream in Polar Fog* is a reminder of a time when novels had adventure and mystery, before the ubiquity of video made everything on Earth seem familiar, yet also abstract and distant. Its themes are grand, elemental, and simple, comprehensible in the junior high school manner of discussing literature (Man v. Nature, Man v. Himself, and so on), but also tricky and subtle. This is the work of a writer in full command of the novelistic form. It recalls, in both substance and style, the best work of Jack London and Herman Melville, and it is a novel in the grandest sense of the word.

Unlike so many contemporary fiction writers, this author isn't looking to impress us with his cleverness or with narrative trickery. He's trying to reclaim the story of a people before it disappears forever, and his efforts give *A Dream in Polar Fog* an extraordinary urgency. Rytkheu is a descendent of the Chukchi people, an Arctic aboriginal tribe whose land happened to fall under control of the Russian Czar in the 1800s. His narrative begins at the dawn of the twentieth century, as modernity begins to make its creeping assault on the "authentic" Chukchi way of life. Rytkheu depicts that assault sympathetically while not descending into the reductionist pits of political correctness. As he tells the story, the Chukchi are not savage, but neither are they particularly noble. Their simple life on the shores of an icy sea may have a kind of cleansing purity, but it's also a hellish battle with the elements that seems, at times, inhuman.

Modernity arrives in the form of John Mac-Lennan, the story's protagonist, a Canadian sailor wounded in a gruesome accident and stranded by his mates to live in an alien Arctic wasteland. He serves as our narrative proxy. As he heals from his terrible injuries, our perspective on the culture

unfolds along with his. He begins in abject terror, in a scene as terrifying as any in a contemporary horror movie, while a native shaman amputates his hands to stop the "black blood" of frostbite from stopping his heart; he truly believes that the Chukchi are going to eat him. Gradually, they nurse him back to health, and he becomes one of them, to the point where he marries a native woman and fathers children.

Yet this is no *Dances with Wolves*. The natives aren't depicted as a pure alternative to the encroachments of the white men. Some of them are selfish, greedy, and superstitious. Others are prideful to a fault. While some of the native customs and myths Rytkheu describes are quite beautiful, some seem needlessly cruel. Similarly, the white men are depicted in various ways: some of the sailors the Chukchi encounter are honorable, while others seek to rob them of their food supply. Explorers arrive and offer aid, while greedy traders seek to accelerate the culture's destruction for personal gain. Looming in the background are the Alaskan gold rush and, later, the Russian Revolution. In modern times, no people escape the torrents of history.

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MacLennan, whose perspective occupies nearly the entire narrative, is himself a mess of contradictions. On the one hand, the book depicts his journey toward consciousness, both of himself and of nature's greater plan. He learns to become self-reliant even without his hands, and quickly tries to stop imposing his own cultural values on the people who saved his life. But he's also maddeningly self-righteous and self-sacrificing, working against his best interests even when his adopted tribe begs him otherwise.

Beyond the book's grand themes and conflicts, which are many, Rytkheu depicts, simply but in great detail, the customs, traditions, and circumstances of a people whose lives are utterly unlike our own. There are walrus hunts, shamanic ceremonies, and long sled-drives across the tundra. By book's end, you know what seal meat tastes like and how to bring a

duck down from the sky without the use of a gun. There is a heartbreaking and harrowing famine chapter. The agony and chill feel palpable, and Rytkeu makes a point quite strongly and surprisingly: modern people don't have to suffer like this. They have heating sources and food in tins. Some traditions should endure, while others should fade into the past. Yesterday is different than tomorrow, cultures merge and transform, and the earth is a mutable entity. Those occasional departures from sentimentality give this novel a maturity that most books about "native" people seem to lack.

The Arctic landscape overwhelms all else in the book. It can't be separated from the people who occupy it:

Quietly, the ocean breathed. Water splashed by a thick faultline in the blue ice. Toko looked over to the eastern side of the sky, to where a distant cape pointed a long black finger at the vastness of the seascape. The sky above the crags was clear, noth-

ing to indicate a change of weather. But you had to be careful in springtime. The wind could suddenly change, and the crevasse-covered ice could break into ice floes from a light breeze and carry the hunters out into the open sea.

Rarely has humanity's relationship to nature been so beautifully and vividly depicted. *A Dream in Polar Fog* is both elegant and exciting and also serves as a living anthropology of a gone world. It accomplishes everything a novel should.

*Neal Pollack is the author of three books of satire, including The Neal Pollack Anthology of American Literature (McSweeney's) and the rock-n-roll novel Never Mind the Pollacks (HarperCollins). He also edited the anthology Chicago Noir (Akashic). His memoir, Daddy Was a Sinner, will be published by Pantheon in the fall of 2006.*