

# **SOUTHERN EXPOSURE: BELATED RECOGNITION OF A SIGNIFICANT INUK WRITER-ARTIST**

Michael P.J. Kennedy  
Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
Canada, S7N 5A5

## **Abstract / Resume**

Alootook Ipellie was born on Baffin Island in 1951 and grew up during a period of Inuit transition. He experienced first-hand the evolving nature of Inuit culture as the values and attitudes of the South moved northward. Through his use of visual art, non-fiction, poetry, and fiction, he has imaginatively captured Inuit transitions in the latter half of the 20th century. This article provides readers with an introduction to this uniquely talented writer-artist and his work.

Alootook Ipellie est né à l'île Baffin en 1951 et a grandi pendant une période de transition pour les Inuits. Il a vécu de première main l'évolution de la nature de la culture Inuit de même que le mouvement des valeurs et attitudes du Sud vers le Nord. En se servant de l'art visuel, de la poésie, et de la fiction, il a saisi de manière imaginative les périodes de transition inuit dans la deuxième moitié du vingtième siècle. L'article offre au lecteur un premier contact avec cet écrivain-artiste au talent unique ainsi qu'avec son oeuvre.

For well over two decades, an Inuk artist has been creating visual and verbal images which epitomize the reality of being Inuit in the latter half of the 20th century. Yet for well over two decades, the imaginative creations of Alooook Ipellie have been largely overlooked by Canadians living outside the Arctic. Recently Ipellie's prolific creative endeavours have begun to receive some recognition in the South. Nevertheless, the forty-five year old writer-artist remains largely unknown among most Canadians despite his impressive body of work.

Alooook Ipellie was born within a semi-nomadic Inuit family on Baffin Island in 1951. He learned first-hand the ways of survival on the land from his family during the initial four years of his life. After his family moved into Iqaluit, Ipellie as an older child returned periodically to hunting and fishing on the land with his uncle. More than learning the Inuit ways of physical survival, Ipellie's childhood also afforded him the opportunity to discover his Inuit cultural traditions, and in particular the art of story:

I used to go out with my grandfather alone in the summer to go to the other side of the bay from Iqaluit to put in the nets to catch Arctic char. He would tell stories about what he knew." Other times, he "would tell stories at night after he had stopped carving, because he would carve all day at the back of the house." "I have always been fascinated by stories ever since I used to hear my grandfather telling them. I had the feeling that I wanted to do it for a lifetime, but I had no idea that I was going to [eventually] do it" (Kennedy, 1995:np).

Ipellie's direct contact with Inuit tradition was primarily through his experiences on the land and with his grandfather. Yet as a youth growing up in Baffin Island's largest community, the influence of the South was very strong as well. During the 1950s and early 1960s, schooling in Iqaluit meant Inuit children studied the Alberta provincial curriculum. Teachers were exclusively non-Inuit and Inuit traditions had no formal place within the educational experiences of the children (Kennedy, 1995:np). It was a time of change in the Eastern Arctic as the Qallunaat (White people) and their culture came in conflict with the Inuit and their traditional way of life. What had been a largely self-sufficient, nomadic, hunting society which had respect for a land to be shared by all was being replaced by values, attitudes, and beliefs of the South. Inuit were encouraged to abandon their traditional way of life on the land and to move into settlements where there was little opportunity for employment. "Inuit families were eventually forced to live in settlements where their children were first introduced to the English language. Inuktitut, their native language, was left out entirely from the school curriculum, resulting in many of the children losing their fluency in Inuktitut" (Ipellie, 1983a:20).

As a quiet and shy youth, Alooook Ipellie observed the conflicts within his community. Alcoholism, which affected his step-father, played a significant role in the environment in which Ipellie matured. The overall sociological and psychological impact of an encroaching way of life alien to the traditional Inuit caused an upheaval in the Arctic which is reflected well in much of Ipellie's adult creative work.

The young Inuk was uprooted from the Arctic to attend grades seven and eight in Ottawa where he also completed two years of vocational high school (Ipellie, 1992b:25-26; 1983b:54). He returned briefly to Iqaluit, studied for a short time in Yellowknife, and then ultimately returned to Ottawa where he continued his studies and, in 1973, was hired as a translator and typist for the Inuktitut section of *Inuit Monthly* (Ipellie, 1983b:54, 58). It was there that he was able to build on what he had learned about drawing as a student in Iqaluit and Ottawa:

I started doing fillers because they needed to cover space in the magazine. I did these little characters with no captions whatsoever, just images of everyday life. [I did] little animals of the Arctic. That's when it [cartooning] started, I started doing the one box cartoons (Kennedy, 1995:np).

In 1974, he began his highly successful "Ice Box" cartoon series in *Inuit Monthly*. The cartoons featured the Nook family and provided northern readers with a humorous look at issues affecting the Arctic. The Nooks, like Ipellie himself, were living through a transitional period in the North during which traditional Inuit language, social structure, and means of survival were being superseded by the new social, religious, and political structures of the South. Hunting on the land and using dog teams, for example, were rejected by many younger Inuit who instead sought a way of life more like the Qallunaat. There was a shift from living from the land to existence within the settlements and travel by dog sled was replaced by gasoline-powered motor toboggan.

According to Ipellie, he uses cartoons as "a tool to put out a message that is affecting our people... "

If I am thinking about something that is affecting my people in some way, then if I can somehow make it simpler in one picture, or one cartoon, then maybe I can help people to understand it better and have a laugh at the same time (Kennedy, 1995:np).

Alooook Ipellie had poetry published as early as 1971. One poem appeared with one of his illustrations in the March 1971 newsletter of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (Ipellie, 1983:54). In May of that year, three more poems appeared in *North* (Ipellie, 1971:34-37).

"ICE BOX"

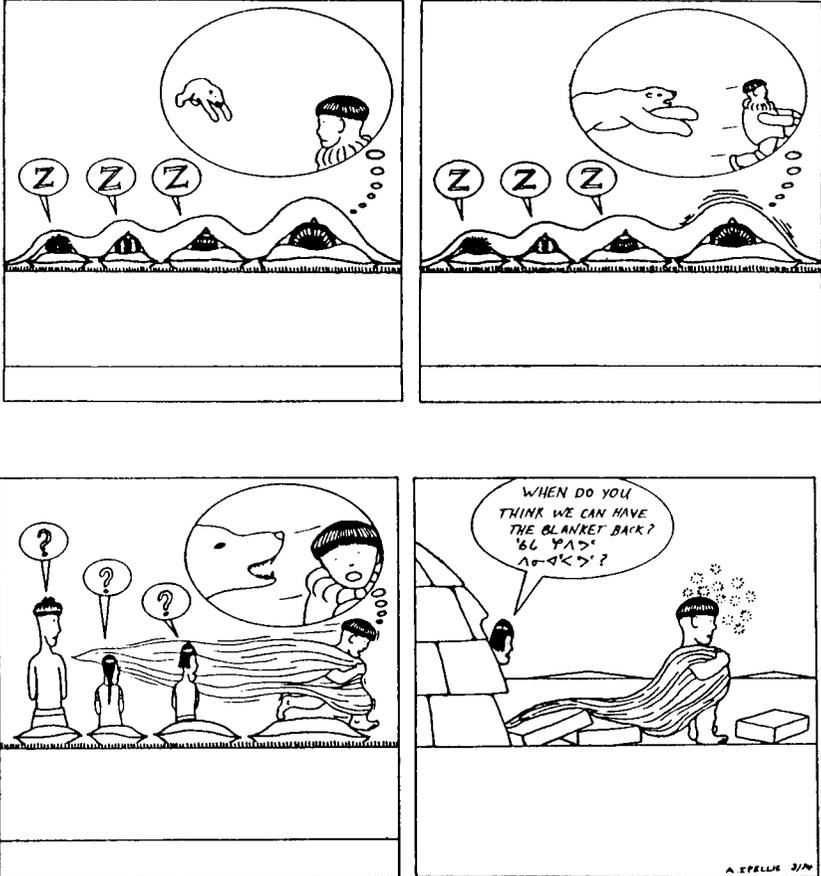


Illustration 1: "Ice Box" cartoon strip, published in *Inuit Today* magazine, March, 1974

From "Hot to Warm and Cool to Cold"

The mosquitos are at large today  
 As the wind stills, as the sun heats,  
 And we walk the rocks under,  
 Searching the hills for the meat  
 And hide of the useful caribou  
 That feeds and clothes my family,  
 Through four different seasons  
 When the winds change from  
 Hot to warm, and cool to cold.

It's hot today and my boy is tired  
 We've been walking for miles too long  
 With a pack of things we need to eat and sleep  
 While we're on a hunt searching the hills  
 For food. We need so very much to date,  
 But we will have to stop to rest  
 Ourselves, hoping and hoping all the time,  
 The hunted one will come to sight  
 When the winds change from  
 Hot to warm, and cool to cold.

"Hot to Warm, and Cool to Cold" is poetry that captures in unadorned fashion something of the relationship between the Inuit and the land upon which they depended for survival. Here Ipellie presents a traditional Inuit voice, unencumbered by southern values, attitudes, and beliefs. While his later works maintain contact with this tradition, they also include the interaction of that tradition with the influences of southern Canada.

Readers in the Arctic became familiar with Ipellie's illustrations, poetry, and non-fiction articles which appeared in periodicals such as *North, Inuit Monthly* (later *Inuit Today*), *Inukshuk*, and *Nunatsiaq News* throughout the 1970s and 1980s. At one time or another during this period, he was cartoonist, reporter, journalist, poet, fiction author and, from 1979 to 1982, editor of *Inuit Today*.

His journalism reflected the tempestuous nature of contemporary Inuit culture. He wrote columns and stories and created cartoons which were aimed at speaking directly to the people of the North about what it was to be Inuit in the 1970s and 1980s: "When I was working for *Inuit Today*, the thought I always had [was] to fill each issue with what's happening now with my people, what needs to be said about current events" (Kennedy, 1995:np).

At times, he wrote autobiographical pieces such as the serialized "Those Were the Days" which related what it was to be a young Inuk in Iqaluit in a time of transition (Ipellie, 1983:56). He also created short fiction



**Illustration 2:** "The Idiot Box is Here", published in *Inuit Today* magazine, May, 1975

pieces which further developed the topic of Inuit culture and society in transition. One story, "Jonnilie and the Kakiak Family" appeared in the January/February 1978 issue of *Inuit Today*. In the Preface, Ipellie discusses briefly the relevance of the story to his readers:

The story centres around a little Inuk boy name Jonnilie and an uncertain world he is forced to enter at a young age of eight. This story grew out of my desire to say a few words about misuse of alcohol amongst our people in the north. Alcohol has and continues to hurt many Inuit. It is my hope that this short story can do a small part in opening someone's eyes to the injustices that are forced upon many innocent victims closely associated with the overconsumption of alcohol.

... You might say that the life and times of Jonnilie could well be closely related to my own experiences as a young adolescent sandwiched between the difficult times of indecision and the chaotic world of alcoholism I never asked for (1987a:34).

As seen in early poetry such as "Hot to Warm, and Cool to Cold," Ipellie's poetry later in the decade is also often brief and simple in structure although he has created longer narratives such as "The Strangers" which are very effective in capturing the conflict between Inuit and Qallunaat cultures (Ipellie, 1978:19-25). The shorter poetry, such as "We Are Cold" which appeared in *Inuit Today* in the January/February issue in 1978, is direct and sensitive in relating human emotions:

### "We Are Cold"

My parents left us this morning  
To go fishing on the ice.  
We are cold in the igloo  
With tears running down our cheeks.  
My brother is young and hungry  
For there is no food to eat.  
So we just sit and hope our  
Parents will come soon with food.  
We do not even have any tea  
For us to drink and warm up a bit.  
We do not say a word to each other,  
Just hoping that our parents will  
Come home soon with food alone... (1978c:53).



**Illustration 3:** "After Brigitte Bardot", from the book by Alootook Ipellie, *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, published by Theytus Books, 1993.

The poetry and prose of Alooook Ipellie during this period of his life was fairly straightforward. "Nipikti the Old Man Carver" was published in *The Beaver* (1980b:49-52) and in Robin Gedalof's *Paper Stays Put* anthology (1980:96-99). Other works also appeared in the Gedalof volume as well as in Penny Petrone's *Northern Voices* ("Frobisher Bay Childhood," Petrone, 1988:243-248. "Damn those Invaders," Petrone, 1988:248-252), *The Beaver* ("Frobisher Bay Childhood," 1980a:4, 6, 8), and *Canadian Fiction Magazine* ("Siqiniq 'The Sun,'" 1980:13-16) thereby giving Southerners some exposure to Ipellie's work. These works along with most of his drawings at the time were imaginative creations, yet they were by no means controversial and received negligible critical recognition.

In the late 1980s, however, Ipellie's work moved toward being more enigmatic and somewhat controversial. A major indication of this change during his post-*Inuit Today* editing days was his exhibit of pen and ink drawings at Sisimiut, Greenland during an Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1989 (Alia, 1989:59). He created forty drawings of which twenty became the impetus for his first collection of stories, *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* which appeared in 1993 (Gessell, 1994:D 5). The visual images are often quite disturbing yet always imaginative and occasionally playful. The drawings created for "Public Execution of the Hermaphrodite Shaman," "I Crucified," and "The Dogteam Family" are effectively unsettling while those used in "When God Sings With a Blue's Band" or "After Brigitte Bardot" are lightly satiric. The twenty stories which comprise the collection came from these black pen and ink depictions.

In his Introduction to *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, Ipellie notes how it is important to retain "the old myths, stories, and legends so that [the] present generation can absorb them and pass them to future generations" (1993:xiv). The fictional world of Alooook Ipellie has evolved beyond that of traditional Inuit story. Ipellie's fiction and art reflect well his knowledge of tradition as well as his sensitivity to how that tradition has been affected by southern culture and values. Mere retention of the old stories alone does not reflect the contemporary Inuit experience. Indeed, contemporary Inuit writer-artists must learn to "adapt their imagination and their story-telling tradition to suit today's artistic demands" (Ipellie, 1993:xv). The world depicted in the art and words of Ipellie's *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* is one in which an Inuit shaman narrator faces the very human problems of hunger, anger, jealousy, and sexual frustration. These situations are presented through visual and verbal magic rooted in Inuit tradition imaginatively combined with contemporary idiom to create a new experience. Ipellie has fabricated a fictional world which is inhabited by such familiar Inuit beings as the Sea Goddess Sedna, shamans, and walruses yet through the creative hand of the author these are combined with recognizable

Qallunaat individuals such as William Shakespeare and Brigitte Bardot to provide effective stories relevant to readers in the 1990s.

Ipellie is effective in illustrating the conflict between Inuit and the southern cultures in a story such as "After Brigitte Bardot." With satiric wit he exposes well the hypocrisy of critics of the seal hunt whose desire for media attention seems to supersede any knowledgeable understanding of the impact of the hunt on the Inuit:

There must have been sixty media hounds, twenty dog teams and assorted other hangers-ons milling around this blonde woman laying on the sea ice, hugging a white-coated baby harp seal pup. I couldn't believe my eyes! What was the big deal? "Who is she? Why the fuss over the baby seal?" I asked a man who was also observing the theatrics on the sea ice.

"She's the famously beautiful French actress, Brigitte Bardot. She's here to save the baby seals from the senseless slaughter they receive every spring from seal clubbers."

"I don't understand. What does she have against us? We're just simple Inuit trying to make ends meet by hunting and selling sealskins. It's our only bread and butter. Why is she targeting us?" "I'm not exactly sure, but it may have something to do with her being an animal freak and feeling the need to identify herself as the saviour of all animal species on earth. Who knows, maybe it's just a publicity stunt. She hasn't exactly been seen on the silver screen lately." "I'm wondering how she ever ended up fighting for the rights of baby harp seals. France has never even seen a single seal in its entire history... just curious" (Ipellie, 1993:105-107).

\* \* \* \* \*

The photo-op was soon over. Brigitte Bardot put the stuffed seal into a gym bag and headed for the sledge she had taken to get here. All twenty dog teams soon sped away, led by Brigitte Bardot's team. It was at this point I promised myself I would never go see any of her B-movies ever again. My family and I set up camp and were happy to be rid of the sixty reporters, twenty dog teams, Brigitte Bardot, *et al.* I was looking forward to hunting and gathering seals for their valuable skins, which we had come to depend on to make a little money to augment some lean times (Ipellie, 1993:109).

If the earlier work of Ipellie was intended to reach Inuit of the North, this collection was intended to get in touch with both the Inuit and Qallunaat: "I am living between the two cultures. I always thought about both of them when I was making the [stories and drawings]" (Kennedy, 1995:np). The

effect of *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* was to draw the attention of critics who wrote for such publications as *Inuit Art Quarterly*, *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, *Paragraph*, and the *Ottawa Citizen* as well as Iqaluit's *Nunatsiaq News*. Drew Hayden Taylor in *Paragraph* referred to the collection as "an amazing jump into the fluid and colourful mind of a man whose culture and personal life is in transition" (1994:38). Jim Bell in *Nunatsiaq News* notes: "In Ipellie's images and stories the normal boundaries of time, space, and reality have collapsed" (1994:11). Paul Gessell in the *Ottawa Citizen* recognizes how effectively Ipellie has joined together the duality within himself and within his people through the fictive creations within the collection: "The inspiration is ancient and northern but the media and techniques are often modern and urban" (6 February 1994:D 5).

A story such as "Summit with Sedna: Mother of Sea Beasts" is grounded in the traditional Woman of the Sea legend which is pan-Arctic in scope. The Sedna story has a history among people of the North extending from East Greenland to Siberia. In the artistic hands of Ipellie, however, Mother of Sea Beasts is described in frank terms relevant to contemporary readers in the 1990s. She is described as a sexually frustrated woman, victim of an abusive childhood:

It had started when she was still a little girl living in the natural world a few years before she became a Goddess of the Sea. Her father had sexually abused her many times, and when it occurred, it lasted for hours on end. It was because of this prolonged abuse that she became emotionally, mentally, and physically doomed to sexual impotency - unable to have an orgasm no matter how hard or what method she tried (Ipellie, 1993:39).

Alootook Ipellie's work has appeared in the 1990s in Moses and Goldie's *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* ("Journey Towards Possibilities," 1992:261-263. "Summit with Sedna," 1992:255-257. "Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border," 1992:263-267. "Waking Up," 1992:258-261), *Northern Review* ("Public Execution of the Hermaphrodite Shaman," 1993:168-170), and *Canadian Literature* ("Dancing Sun," 1990:272. "Water Moved an Instant Before," 272). His cartoon Nuna & Vut is seen regularly in *Nunatsiaq News* and he is currently working on a series of visual depictions of polar bears. In addition, he has written an autobiographical piece. He has created as well a novel which features a 100 year old man, an Inuk of about twenty-five years, and a retired Scottish fisherman from Aberdeen. In keeping with the magic reality of *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, this new novel, tentatively entitled *Akavic, The Manchurian David Bowie*, portrays the three men confined to a hut where they interact with each other as well as with such larger than life characters as David

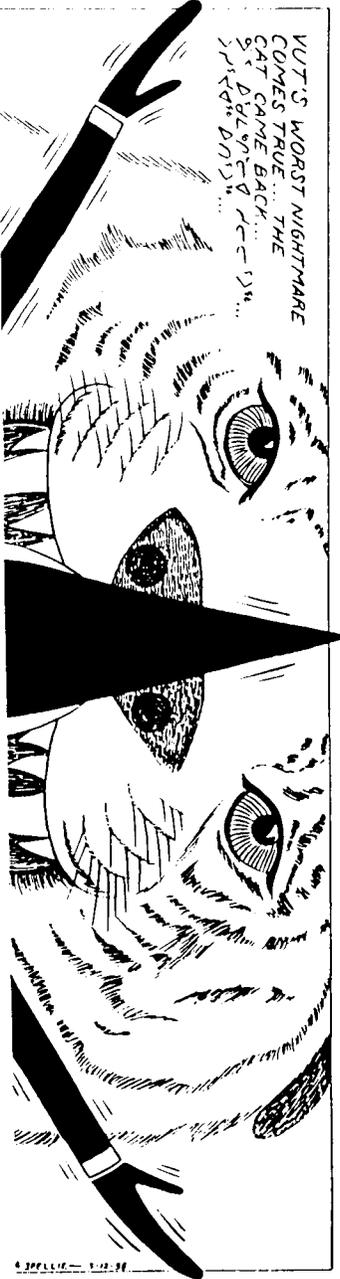
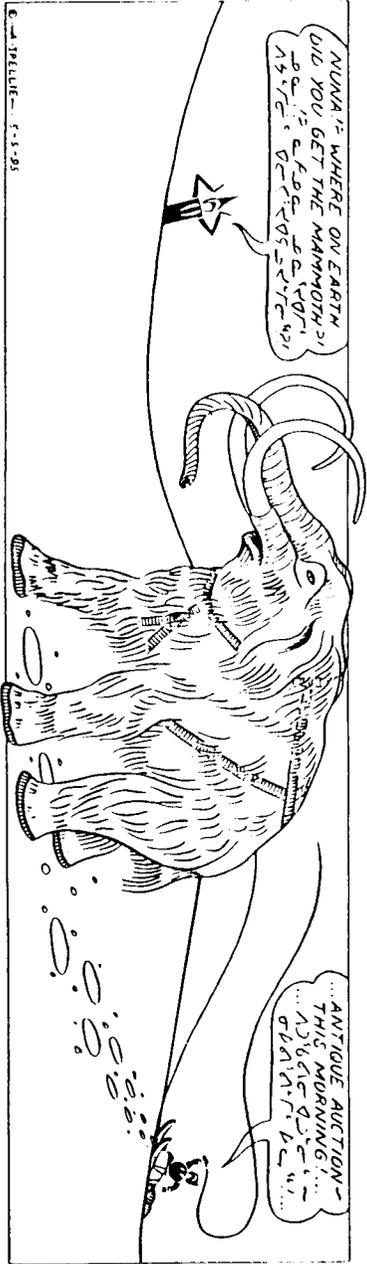


Illustration 4: "Nuna & Vut" cartoon strip, published in Nunatsiq News, May, 1995

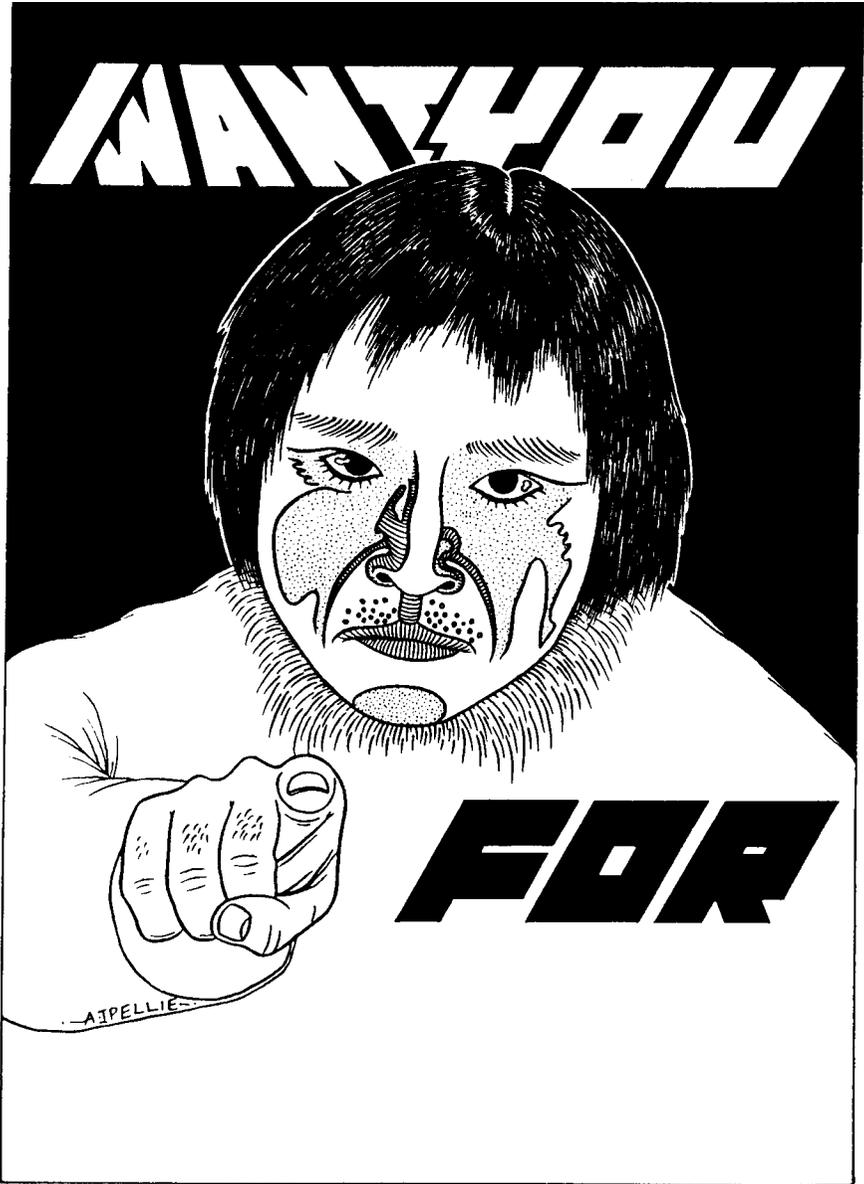


Illustration 5: "I Want You For...", published in *Nunavut Newsletter*, December, 1991

Bowie, Charlie Chaplin, the Pope, Madonna, and Elvis (Kennedy, 1995:np). This novel should only add to Ipellie's expanding reputation as an imaginative artist-writer.

As editor of *Kivioq: Inuit Fiction Magazine* (1990; 1992) and as Project Co-ordinator of the Baffin Writers Project, Ipellie's dedication to having the voice of contemporary Inuit be heard is obvious (Freeman, 1990:266-271). Yet for too long his own creative accomplishments were unknown to those outside the Arctic.

At long last the creative work of Alootook Ipellie has begun to be recognized by those in the South. He is a significant talent whose work captures well the reality of being Inuit in the latter half of the 20th Century.

### References

Alia, Valerie

1989 Ipellie's Interior Visions. *Up Here* 5(5):59.

Freeman, Victoria

1990 The Baffin Writers' Project. *Canadian Literature* 124-125:266-271.

Gedalof, Robin

1980 *Paper Stays Put: A Collection of Inuit Writing*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishing.

Gessell, Paul

1994 Dreaming in the Arctic. *Ottawa Citizen* (6 February):D 5.

Ipellie, Alootook

1993 *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*. Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books.

1992a *Kivioq: Inuit Fiction Magazine* 2.

1992b Nunatsiaqmiut: People of the Good Land (Part 2). *Inuit Art Quarterly* 7(3):22-28.

1990 *Kivioq: Inuit Fiction Magazine* 1.

1983a Inuit Today Magazine. *North* 30(1):20-23.

1983b My Story. *North* 30(1):54-58.

1980a Frobisher Bay Childhood. *The Beaver* 310(4):4, 6, 8.

1980b Nipikti the Old Man Carver. *The Beaver* 311:49-52.

1980c Siqiniq "The Sun". *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 36-37:13-16.

1978a Jonnilie and the Kakiak Family. *Inuit Today* 7(1):34-39.

1978b The Strangers. *Inuit Today* 7(1):19-25.

1978c We Are Cold. *Inuit Today* 7(1):53.

1971 Hot to Warm and Cool to Cold. *North* 18(3):34-37.

Kennedy, Michael P. J.

1995 An Interview with Alooook Ipellie. Ottawa: Unpublished.

1994 Arctic Dreams and Nightmares. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14(1):181-183.

Moses, Daniel David and Terry Goldie

1992 *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Petrone, Penny

1988 *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Taylor, Drew Hayden

1994 Review of *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*. *Paragraph Magazine* 16(2):38.

Find 8191 researchers and browse 192 departments, publications, full-texts, contact details and general information related to University of Saskatchewan | Saskatoon, Canada | U of S. University of Saskatchewan. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Join institution. Overview. Departments (192). Members (8,191). Stats overview. 8,191. Government of Saskatchewan is not responsible for any damage or issues that may possibly result from using translated website content. If you have any questions about Google Translate, please visit: Google Translate FAQs. Residents and Visitors. The First Nations University of Canada, with campuses at the University of Regina in Regina, in Prince Albert and Saskatoon. Federated colleges are academically integrated with one of the two provincial universities, but are also legally and financially independent with different governing boards. Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, located in Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert and other community site locations. University of Saskatchewan (U of Sask), founded in 1907, is a not-for-profit Canadian institute located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Renowned as one of Canada's 15 leading research-intensive universities, U of Sask offers a highly enriching research environment with the best of facilities in the country. It is the only Canadian university in partnership with Oxford University and is also a member of the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities. With a student satisfaction rate of over 90% and an acceptance rate of approximately 73%, U of Sask is indeed a university of choice among inter University of Saskatchewan (abbreviation - U of S) was founded in Saskatoon (economically strongest city) in 1907. Here is the main campus of the university. The University of Saskatchewan is famous for its strong and popular learning spheres ("Life Sciences and Medicine"), entering the TOP-300 all over the world. The University of Saskatchewan is a member of several groups and associations, including the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Canadian University of the Intercollegiate Debate (CUSID) and the Canadian University Press. Programs, courses and tuition/boarding fees, prices in University of Saskatchewan. Program name. Date.