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Split Tooth by Tanya Tagaq

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From Form to Fact in Fiction: Extended Ways of Knowing in Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth*

***Split Tooth* by TANYA TAGAQ**

Viking Canada, 2018. \$19.99

Reviewed by **BRIANNA LEBEL**

Long-listed for the 2018 Giller Prize, Tanya Tagaq's first book, *Split Tooth*, is an awakening. The 2014 Polaris prizewinning artist and Inuit throat singer, world renowned for her spectral tones and haunting, extended performances, has now written a book that earnestly defies categorization.

The writing is stark and storied, warm and powerful—an invitation to bear witness to the complexities of life in 1970s Cambridge Bay. Mixing memoir with poetry, dream-writing with concrete and fantastical fiction, *Split Tooth* is a negotiation of knowing. Centred on life stories of the narrator, a young Inuk girl, Tagaq punctuates youthful adventures and spiritual interventions with visions of the self, of the land, and of community that are both fierce and fragile, whole and broken.

The narrative forms shift quietly and then starkly from one perspective to another—from prose to poetry to the imprinted illustrations of Jaime Fernandez—resisting set classification. Threaded seamlessly throughout the body of the work, varied forms of representation mark the narrator's movement through childhood, adolescence, motherhood, and beyond. A few selections are tethered to dates, places, and moments with titles such as, "1975," "A Day in the Life," "Nine Mile Lake," and "Ritual," but there are no official chapter breaks or table of contents,

allowing stories and characters to be woven into one another.

Similar fluidity is reflected in the narrator's hesitance to name the characters themselves. While "old woman," "uncle," and "fox" embody their own distinct characteristics within Tagaq's ranging narrative, these individuals may be folded into other textual moments. Such gaps hold space for many stories, times, and ways of being: a notion of flexibility that Tagaq returns to throughout the book.

Just as humans and animals in *Split Tooth* are charged with personal narratives, so are lands, skies, and waters. Just as the humans and animals are exploited by colonial systems of containment and control, so is the natural world:

Global warming will release the deeper smells and coax stories out of the permafrost. Who knows what memories lie deep in the ice? Who knows what curses? Earth's whispers released back into the atmosphere can only wreak havoc. (6)

Highlighting the agency of Earth and the secrets it's keeping, Tagaq attends to the Western world's insatiable production and consumption of oil—a reality that Inuit know well, as the Canadian government continues to press for seismic testing along the Arctic ocean floor (87).

The stories themselves are sad and funny and beautiful: a sensorial overload that encourages the reader to engage with the narrator's movement from a myriad of vantage points:

Smells unleashed from the spring thaw lift us into a frenzied desperation for movement. The air is so clean you can smell the difference between smooth

rock and jagged. You can smell water running over shale. (6)

Recalling the sun's jubilant return after a long winter, the narrator and her friends flail their jazzed-up bodies through the town. "We all cheer!" inventing water games with flats of abandoned Styrofoam and sticks,

next week, seven kids drowned in a larger pond closer to the airport after using a water tank cut in half as a boat. We never played our Styrofoam game again. (9)

Passages like this lull you into a careful, quiet reverie and then crack your heart open, and become even more compelling in the audiobook read by Tanya Tagaq.

Comic tales of snail procreation and lemming head massages accentuate the chilling normality of sexual abuses that advance and follow these beautiful moments.

Acknowledging the cyclical and ongoing implications of residential schools and the Canadian government's continued interference with Inuit communities, Tagaq points readers beyond the seemingly linear narrative: backwards and forwards in time. "Every time it was different," the narrator recalls, as two children sit knee to knee, hiding in a closet (1):

Sometimes there was only thumping, screaming, moans, laughter. Sometimes the old woman would come in and smother us with her suffering love Even then I knew that love could be a curse. (1)

Attentions to physical, environmental, sexual, and substance abuse continue

throughout the text, forcing the reader to acknowledge the weighted realities of life within a colonial framework.

Ultimately, the narrator turns to the land in search of connection. Childhood encounters with the land often take place in relationship with other humans—with the narrator and her friends running along the edge of town in "black-haired human pack[s]" (12), or venturing out onto the tundra with a cousin. As the narrator grows older, such explorations shift towards personal and spiritual journeys, (re)connecting her with Inuit stories that press into and extend concrete notions of time and space. Far from town, lying out on the ice, under the Northern Lights, the narrator attests,

Our minds are our prisons. There are secrets hidden in our flesh. Our cells being born and dying with the same force that makes galaxies form and deconstruct. Context. Perspective. Scale. . . . Everyone has the niggling sensation that we are missing something in the world, but I have the key. (111)

As Soul leaves Body, sinking down through a crack in the ice, the narrator explores the syrupy realm of Inuit sea goddess, Sedna (85; 110–15): "I slowly spread myself out to hold and love as many creatures as possible. Spirit drinks from Life. This is the secret" (112). The narrative drives at a negotiation of spiritual and physical selves: tracing a becoming of self, of friend, of lover, of mother. Despite the narrator's spiritual journeys and physical connections, she cannot overcome the realities of abuse, loss and, in turn, her own attempt at a magical infanticide:

Milk Death
Split tooth
Sorrow Marrow
Whispered truth. (184)

Short, rhythmic poems punctuate the overarching relational movement, sounding stories that are often ignored in popular settler narratives.

Dedicated to the "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," Tanya Tagaq has crafted a harsh, deserved critique of Canadian colonialism in ways that simultaneously celebrate Inuit cultures and what it means to live on the northern tundra. This is a book for seeing, for hearing, for imagining. Tangible articulations of texture, scent, and sound dig into the physical world, while journeys through Inuit pasts, presents, and futures speak to worlds beyond settler time.

BRIANNA LABEL is currently pursuing an Interdisciplinary Humanities PhD at Concordia University. Attempting to interrupt her primary framework as a literary settler scholar, Brianna is interested in concrete, relational connections between food, land, and story.