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Crow Never Dies by Larry Frolick

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The Hunter is the Chooser

***Crow Never Dies: Life on the Great Hunt* by LARRY FROLICK**

University of Alberta Press, 2016 \$29.95

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

The far North has long played a powerful role in Canadian history and myth-making. In *Crow Never Dies*, Larry Frolick sets out to immerse himself in the actual physical place of the North, as opposed to literary and imaginative versions of it. He suggests that when and if Canadians go to the North, we are weighed down with our own cultural and colonial baggage, including several centuries of misunderstandings when it comes to Northern Indigenous peoples and their lifeways.

Yet, he claims there is a “real North” that exists outside of our history, media, and literature. Although acknowledging this might be contentious, Frolick faces the debate head on. This book, he writes in the first chapter, assumes three basic points:

1. The subsistence relationship between First Nations people and the Land is meaningfully different from that of agricultural and industrial people and is worth understanding on its own for such differences.
2. The remnant features of this subsistence technology point to the ways that Europeans’ ancestors might also have followed to survive for thousands of years.
3. Northern folkways and traditions offer valuable and universal lessons about human potential in our contemporary era, since First Nations, too, have survived the

dangerous crises of history to the present day. (7)

He anticipates some of the more predictable counterarguments to these points, and rather than arguing, he suggests that the stalemate can “only be broken by action, by going into the bush with northern peoples and actually observing what happens out there” (8). The resulting volume is part travelogue, part philosophical inquiry, part participant-observation ethnography—and a wholehearted celebration of the North.

Crow Never Dies is laid out in four sections, documenting cultural events and subsistence activities associated with each season. These sections are comprised of smaller chapters, with titles like “Hunting is Trapping,” “Knife versus Ulu” and “Berry Picking” that detail Frolick’s first-hand observation of various aspects of Northern technology and food-gathering. Some chapters document discussions with Northern artists, or time spent on traplines; others are more wide-ranging in their research and scope. “Northern Dogs” is a study of the vital roles that dogs have played in the lives and communities of Northern peoples for millennia; “The Mystery of the Blue Beads” investigates the movements and the cultural importance of early European trade goods.

While these chapters include archival and scholarly research, I think the real value of Frolick’s work lies in its first-person experience. Every chapter is built around personal conversations with Northern elders, hunters, and story-tellers. In this documentary approach, *Crow Never Dies* is reminiscent of Hugh Brody’s *Maps and Dreams*. In its questioning of the conventional (that is, southern and predominantly urban) wisdom about the

North and its peoples, it also resembles Tim Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment*.

Indeed, perception is one of the book's recurring themes. There are significant descriptions of perspective, throughout the book, and the necessity of seeing something from more than one angle. Whether it's a crow adjusting its flight pattern to get a better look at the author, or a trapper looking at game trails from a more-than-human point of view, or human travelers who rely on dogs' ability to detect soft ice under the snow before a dogsled hits it, Frolick suggests there is always more than one way to look at the world. And in the unforgiving North, this is an essential skill.

As the title suggests, one of the author's main interests in this book is hunting. As an ethnographic study of Northern hunting culture and traditions, *Crow Never Dies* is perhaps comparable to Richard Nelson's *Make Prayers to the Raven*. Hunting (and not the kind of hunting where tourists pay locals to help them bag trophies, a distinction Frolick is careful to make) requires, and indeed implies, enhanced perception. Hunting itself is a different way of looking at the world. Frolick emphasizes the importance of both memory and luck in hunting — two aspects of human life that have been largely dismissed by Western society and education.

Advances in technology have invariably changed hunting traditions—Frolick describes an increasingly individualistic approach to food, for example, that appeared in Northern communities with the advent of the refrigerator—but, in spite of the almost universal use of modern equipment such as rifles and snowmobiles, many ancient lifeways seem to remain intact. According

to Frolick's friends in the North, accumulated knowledge of the land—as part of the local oral tradition, or what Julie Cruikshank has called the “tools of the mind”—and a spiritual awareness of the boreal forest's watchful ecology, are the hunter's most important technologies—

The hunter is the chooser: historical reality is set in motion by the unrepeatability of his actions. There are no second chances when life or death is a daily act. (261)

His admiration for the detailed knowledge and the consummate skill of Northern hunters is obvious; also interesting are Frolick's depictions of teaching and learning in these contexts. He describes a participant-oriented model that we could not hope to duplicate in our southern classrooms.

Readers interested in Indigenous Studies, or traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), or readers looking for a refreshing and off-the-beaten-path look at Canada's warming North, will not be disappointed by *Crow Never Dies*.

Larry Frolick is Communications Officer with the Government of the Northwest Territories. He has written on a variety of cultural and global subjects, including 21st-century divorce, the biblical Queen of Sheba, and contemporary nomadism in Central Asia. *Crow Never Dies* is his eighth book.

Works Cited

Cruikshank, Julie. *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*, University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

KELLY SHEPHERD is originally from Smithers, British Columbia, and he currently lives and teaches in Edmonton. *Shift*, his first full-length poetry collection, was published in spring 2016 by Thistledown Press.