

2-3-2018

Caribou Run by Richard Kelly Kemick

Emily McGiffin
York University

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Recommended Citation

McGiffin, Emily (2018) "Caribou Run by Richard Kelly Kemick," *The Goose*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 24.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss2/24>

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Seasonal Migrations and Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Old Stories Are New Again

Caribou Run by RICHARD KELLY KEMICK
Icehouse Books, 2016 \$19.95

Reviewed by EMILY McGIFFIN

In his acclaimed memoir, *Being Caribou*, Karsten Heuer writes of his first encounter with the Porcupine caribou herd and his subsequent flurry of impassioned research.

I learned about birth and death rates, preferred foods, and the relative importance of caribou in the modern-day diets of the Gwich'in, Inuvialuit, and Inupiat people in the thirteen communities scattered throughout its range,

he writes.

I read summaries of the movements of radio-collared animals, of archaeological reports that put those movements in historical context, and for relief from all the numbers, I often finished the evenings with a Native story or poem. (Heuer 15)

Had it been available at the time, Richard Kelly Kemick's debut poetry collection, *Caribou Run*, would no doubt have been a welcome addition to Heuer's reading list. Indeed, the book is a graceful and intelligent addition to the creative literature on Canadian wildlife in general, and one whose textured convergences raise a conceptual challenge to technical literatures that parse out human, animal, diet and

landscape, economy and industry as separate and separable entities.

Named for the Porcupine River that runs through a large part of its range, the Porcupine herd is one of several large herds of barren-ground caribou that inhabit the western arctic. It ranges over some 250,000 km² of northern Yukon and northeast Alaska landscape, covering some 5000 km annually as it oscillates between overwintering grounds in the Ogilvie Mountains and calving grounds on the Arctic coast (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

Caribou Run takes its structure from these seasonal movements and life events. Its five sections follow the herd through the summer breeding season, beginning with Spring Migration and followed by Calving, Aggregation, Summer Scatter and Fall Migration. The poems in each section meditate on the multifaceted relationships between humans, the caribou, and the landscapes each inhabit. Throughout the collection, Kemick keeps an eye on the rich bodies of literature—from scientific study to mythology—that coalesce around these creatures and their remarkable migration. Each section begins with a series of quotations that offer many forms of information and insight into the natural history of the species and its resonances with our own.

Despite the book's tight thematic focus, poems in the collection aren't limited to caribou. It issues a call to attend to all denizens of our ailing and fragile planet. "We recognize each other / in the faces of other mammals" (1-2) writes Kemick in "The Calving Grounds." His "Tankas from the Tundra" is a set of three brief odes to arctic animals—short-eared owl, wolverine, and arctic wolf spider—in the traditional Japanese poetic form. "Amidst the Fog of Blackflies, a Bull Charges" is a poem-length

extended metaphor that carries the galloping caribou out of its own world and into a global human landscape:

Trying to escape an insect's hunger,
the thrum of his gallop is like hail
 across Nairobi's tin roofs,
like salsa dancers burning alive on
 scuffed hardwood,
old women arguing on a corner in
 Chinatown,
the clatter of sticks in road hockey,
 breaks in the pool hall,
[...]
Collapsing into the creek, the bull
 crumples,
his breath becomes the sound of
 you
in the kitchen this morning, washing
 the cutting board[.] (1-23)

In lines such as these, Kemick deftly weaves a web of interconnections between human and animal worlds and between the individual and the collective, making plain the relationships and interdependencies among them all.

The journey that Karsten Heuer and Leanne Allison undertook in 2003 and their subsequent book and film that brought the story of the caribou to a wider public was made more urgent by the Bush Administration's pressure to open the Arctic Wildlife Refuge to drilling. Kemick's work arrives at an equally crucial moment: changes in regulations announced last summer will permit seismic studies in the Refuge, clearing a path to energy exploration that was further advanced under Trump's contentious new tax bill (Eilperin; U.S. Department of the Interior). As the *New York Times* reports,

the crush of news out of the Trump White House and the focus on other elements of the tax bill has deflected attention from the fact that the measure would open up the refuge [to drilling]. (Hulse)

With new potential for tragedy brewing, the story of tens of thousands of caribou and the land they depend on for survival is more important than ever. For, although the particularities of their migration are unique, the struggle binds the caribou with the rest of planetary life in the communal project of living. Like the rest of us, the Porcupine caribou herd is unwillingly enmeshed in a die-hard political agenda that adds dark layers of meaning to Kemick's lines,

 tell me stories
of things that don't die, of an Arctic
that will never end. ("The Calving
Grounds" 22-24)

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EMILY MCGIFFIN is a Postdoctoral Fellow at York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies and Poetry Editor of The Goose.