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Smiler's Bones



Synopsis

A striking, fascinatingly told novel based on the harrowing true story of Minik, an Eskimo boy seized in the name of exploration and brought to New York at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1897, famed explorer Robert Peary took six Eskimos from their homes in Greenland to be "presented" to the American Museum of Natural History. Among the six were a father and a son. Soon, four were dead, including the father (whose bones, unbeknownst to the son, were put on display). One returned to Greenland. And the other -- the young boy -- remained, the only Eskimo in New York for twelve years. His name was Minik. This is his story. A story of lies and deceptions. A story about the price of exploration. A story about discovering the truth of a culture.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Grade 5-8 In 1897, arctic explorer Robert Peary took six Polar Eskimos to New York City to be part of a living exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History. In a series of flashbacks, the youngest "specimen," eight-year-old Minik, tells the tale of his journey to New York and the fate of his father, Qisuk, called "Smiler." The wide-eyed boy experiences candy and circus visits, happily unaware that he is a curio for public display. When his father and three others die of pneumonia, the exhibit is closed and Uncle Will, a benevolent museum curator, becomes his new guardian.

Chapters alternate between the naive young Minik and the mature teenager who has trouble coping with the bizarre circumstance of his youth and feelings of isolation. He is devastated to learn that he has been betrayed by Uncle Will, who has allowed Qisuk's skeleton to be macerated and kept in the museum as an artifact, rather than properly buried. The first-person point of view works well as Minik ages, and vivid dreams keep him tied to his family. By juxtaposing chapters, the depressed and cynical teen contrasts sharply with the innocent child brought up in a trusting Eskimo culture. Minik is an unforgettable character, and issues of racism and scientific arrogance will not be lost on readers. — Vicki Reutter, Cazenovia High School, NY Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Gr. 7-10. In this wrenching first novel, based on true events, Lerangis gives voice to Minik, an Eskimo boy who, along with his father and several other villagers, was delivered to New York by Arctic explorer Robert Peary "in the interest of science." First they are put on display at the Museum of Natural History; then consumption strikes: "Four days, four eskimos. Dead, dead, dead, dead." A kind family takes the orphan in, but as he matures, his sense of displacement intensifies—especially after his efforts to claim his father's remains and obtain passage back to Greenland are repeatedly thwarted. Minik recalls his story in flashbacks, describing his first impressions of "civilization" (skyscrapers are "igloos stacked high like icebergs"), then shifting to his adolescence, when his resentment toward Peary took deep root. A somewhat rushed finale brings the novel's now-19-year-old hero to the brink of despair and, finally, to a point of equilibrium. Although the nonlinear narrative may prove disorienting to many readers, the incisive emotions are unforgettable—all the more because they are culled from historical fact. Jennifer Mattson Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Great summer book for my 6th grader! She has enjoyed it a lot and is ready for her book report.

The name "Robert Peary" conjures up vague images from the pages of our history books. A robust, heroic, determined explorer who discovered the South Pole sometime in the 1800s. "Smiler" is the story behind the story, and what Robert Peary really did on his explorations. Robert Peary and his assistants spent time in Greenland, associating with the Polar Eskimos who were fascinated by their guns, small gifts, and iron tools. Peary and the Museum of Natural History were interested in studying authentic specimens, so shipped 6 Eskimos to live

permanently in N.Y.C. Among them was 8 year old Minik, who came with his father. Unfortunately, within months, five of them had died from consumption – a sickness brought by the explorers to their homeland that had also killed Minik’s mother. The Museum buried his father, and sent Minik to live with one of their workers. Now an orphan, Minik spent most of his life as an object of curiosity and scrutiny. As was the custom of the day when it came to Native Americans, he was paraded at Fairs, reported on falsely by newspaper men, laughed at and ridiculed. As an Eskimo he was seen as subhuman, so no indignity was too small. When he was 14 years old, he found out the Museum never buried his father but had given his body to science, then macerated the remains to create a skeleton they planned to display. Despite this indignity happening in 1898, it took until 1993 for the Museum to reluctantly release these skeletal remains to the Polar Eskimos of Greenland for a proper burial. It seemed like heartache and anger followed Minik his whole life until, at age 19, he decided he had endured enough. He wanted to go home, but Peary had other plans. “Smiler’s Bones” is the story of a young boy, mistreated by society for the “crime” of being a minority. It is the story of what it felt like to have one foot in two worlds. It is the untold story of an explorer, and a well known Museum, and what both were willing to do in the name of “science.” I learned a lot from reading this book, and had great sympathy and empathy for Minik. Older elementary students, as well as middle schoolers, will learn much from Minik’s life.

I just finished Smiler’s Bones and it was great. It was hard to get into because it kept going from present to past without telling you. Also, it was hard to figure out the Eskimo language. But it was really good once you got into the book. It’s a story about the explorer Peary and how he brought six Eskimos from Greenland to New York city and put them on display at the Museum of Natural History. They all die but the youngest boy, Minik. It’s really the story of his survival. The other part of the book that’s good is learning about Eskimo customs. A little bit of a surprise ending. It’s also a true story. Read the author’s notes at the end of the book. Definitely worth reading.

A marvelous book. Smiler’s Bones is exciting and funny, tragic and inspiring. The author dives deeply into this fascinating story of a real boy, expanding it and painting in long-forgotten details of Minik’s life, until the reader is left at last with both a vivid sense of life in turn-of-the-century New York and the glaciers of Greenland, as well as an expanded sense of what it means to be alive in any era. At the age of forty, I found it very moving, and I suspect the young reader just beginning to

emerge from an obsession with Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew would find it utterly engrossing. Highly recommended.

while this is a wonderful book and is absolutely haunting, it (i believe) cheats the reader out of the ending. the happy ending supplied by the author is inauthentic and detracts from the story.however, the alternating chapters are heart-wrenching and what this boy went through was absolutely devastating. kids should know about the atrocities of the past, however bad.

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