

A Book Review—

Eskimo Boyhood

ESKIMO BOYHOOD: An Autobiography in Psychosocial Perspective, by Charles C. Hughes. University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1974. Pages 429. Price \$12.75.

As the title indicates, this is really two works combined and both must be clearly distinguished. The first part is the autobiography of a young man from St. Lawrence Island as he grew up in the 1930's through 1940's. The account is in his words with very little editing on the part of Dr. Hughes. Reading the text is truly enlightening. It lets the reader see young Eskimo life in terms of what is important and significant to a young man in those times and that place.

This is also one of the weaknesses: many things a reader might like to know are left unsaid. It can be an education for those of us who are involved in teaching. Traditionally the bush teacher is really "not one of the village." The teacher is generally guaranteed a food supply, a warm house, health care, visits "Outside" and retirement — things which the Native doesn't have.

Secondly, the teacher comes from another cultural pattern and would be lost trying to actually survive in ways that his students and his families have to do it. Yet, the teachers have held most of the power in the village — they control the radio, they interpret the law, they represent the dominant society.

This book might explain some of our educational problems in Alaska. The reader can begin to feel the warm yet awesome respect the boy has for his father and the tender love of his mother and peers. They know how to live successfully as a community because they have to; this is their world, not that of the teacher.

In addition, one can see very clearly that the very things that might make a young man a successful hunter and villager, might be the exact same characteristics that cause problems when they move into complex urban centers.

The second portion of the book is Dr. Hughes' interpretation, strongly biased by his Freudian approach to understanding human behavior and thoughts. It is a valid approach, but will prove to be difficult reading for those who have no background in various theories of childhood development. His approach to analyzing the account through role analysis is sometimes good, sometimes bad. It is unfortunate that he does not refer to Richard Nelson's beautiful account of the "Eskimo as Hunter" (Hunters of the Northern Ice, University of Chicago Press, 1969) to see how young "Nathan's" training is still functional for those who have to live in the villages.

This reviewer got the strong feeling that in some ways the book is "out-of-date," because many things have changed drastically since the events occurred. More than that, the interpretation may be out of date.

One aspect of ethnocentrism is going into a situation thinking you have all the answers without really looking at the facts. Here the facts stand out boldly; now we might have to change our theories.

This is another worthwhile contribution to a growing literature on Alaska that wipes out stereotypes and lets us "see it as it is."

— WALLY OLSON

Asst. Prof. of Anthropology
Juneau-Douglas Community
College