

# ***Book Review***

## **The White Dawn**

By LAEL MORGAN  
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"The White Dawn" by James Houston should go down as an Arctic classic. Rarely is such beauty and depth of writing coupled with such an exciting adventure.

It's the tale of three whalers, one black and two white, who are marooned at an Eskimo camp north of Hudson Bay. It's a true story, Houston tells us, but he's changed all the names because even now—74 years after it happened—it's a hard story to face for those who lived it and for their succeeding generations.

Avinga, last survivor of the camp, narrates from a purely Eskimo point of view which Houston handles with credibility.

Communications without a common language are established. The whalers, different though they are, become accepted. They fit—although a bit awkwardly—into the pattern of village life, migrating with the seasons, weathering famine and enjoying the feasts.

As Avinga follows them, tries to explain them, he gives some marvelous view of the Arctic existence.

"Then we hear the first challenge, a deep-throated, grunting roar. Four times it rumbled up to us from the belly of a huge bull walrus weighing twenty times more than one of the men who hunted him. This big bull

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# 'The White Dawn' - Book by James Houston About Eskimos...

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proclaimed himself the leader, the fighter, the strongest on the rock.

"He could smell us now and

see us. He roared again, and shouldering the younger males and females aside, he violently heaved his great bulk off the

rock with a series of powerful thrusts on his short wide-webbed flippers.

"Out of the water he was battle-scarred and clumsy, but when he slipped his huge brown bulk into the sea, he seemed as sleek and graceful as a salmon disappearing smoothly beneath the surface. All of us eased our harpoons from their ivory rests and waited...

"Some say that the men rule the women in this land, but I am not one who would say that is so, for I have heard the women softly whispering to their husbands in the bed at night, yes, even about hunting plans. In the morning the hunters all too often follow the women's advice, although no man would admit this...

"Some say that we kill our old people. That is not true. Our old people have the strength and pride to kill themselves if they believe that their lives should come to an end.

"Sometimes they may command us to help with their death, and so powerful is the word of a parent that his children may be forced to obey his wishes. That is our way, an ancient custom that we do not think is wrong."

The whalers were to disrupt the ancient customs in many ways. The simplest was their introduction of football.

"They showed the players how to kick the ball violently and fight their way through their neighbors to reach their goal. It was rough and unplea-

sant, puzzling to watch, and when my people understood this new game, they were shocked, for it was not a game of pleasure.

"But still they continued, for everyone wished to be polite to the strangers. In our minds it would have been rude of us to offend them."

But the whalers also introduced gambling and alcohol which served to undermine the power of the village leader. With-

out him they could not survive and neither could the village.

The author is a Canadian who after World War II lived in Baffin Island with the Eskimos for 12 years. He traveled the trails of the villagers and the whalers with his own team and wrote the story from stories the Eskimos told him.

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