

Somebody sure went to extremes

I am appalled.

I am appalled that a book like "Going to Extremes," that is so obviously and blatantly racist, could find such favor among the reading public of the United States, and what is worse, no one seems to have even noticed the racial bias.

It's there, all right, in language I cannot reprint in the Tundra Times because this is a family newspaper. Every chapter, it seems, begins or ends (or both) with a drunken Native either relieving himself in public (believe me, his descriptions were not so guarded), or falling off a bar stool, or something similar. I guess I should be philosophical and say something about the places Mr. McGinniss must have spent his research time, but I am really too outraged for that.

It was not only that, but whenever he cites the population of a town, he is very careful to state what proportion of the population is white, and what proportion Native. This sort of statement carries far subtler and more damaging implications, because there is no defense. He really didn't say anything by such a simple statement, yet he said all sorts of things the average American reader will not miss. That's why I'm outraged by it.

Wherever Mr. McGinniss went in his quickie odyssey, he found the most sordid, the most base, of human failings and frailties. But none so base and sordid as he found among the Natives. He makes some effort to understand why the white people react as they do, but there is no effort at all to understand the culture shock he encountered among the Native people.

Instead, when he just happens to drop in on some folks in the village, and finds them somewhat less than enchanted with his presence, he comes off somewhat miffed by it all.

He encounters TV during its very first introduction into the bush, and cannot understand the fascination it holds. Why should a man who has been working ten hours without letup on a fish trap, suddenly drop it when the Six Million Dollar Man comes on? Why should people be more fascinated with their first glimpse of a Disney Christmas Special be more interested in that than the Slavic procession which they have seen every year since babyhood? And the trash shows they watch! Naturally, you and I and Mr. McGinniss don't watch those!

Yet, confined to four days in the wilderness, he finds himself wishing for—guess what?—TV! Surprise!

Maybe as a book writer myself I feel some sour grapes, but I find it hard to understand why a book like "Going to Extremes" meets with such great popularity when books by authentic Alaskans, who know what they are talking about, go begging.

What it amounts to is another version of the old shell game Alaskans know so well: "Get in, get yours, and get out." McGinniss, who came to Alaska for only as long as necessary to write his book, came here not because he felt anything at all for the country, not because he wanted to come, but because he needed another book to follow up his success with "The Selling of the President." That book, I feel compelled to say, was an excellent book. Too bad I can't say the same for "Going to Extremes."