

BOOK REVIEW

By Frank J. Keim

Thrasher...Skid Row Eskimo. By Anthony Apakark Thrasher. Griffin House, Toronto, 1976.

The author is waiting in prison to be sent to a hospital for the criminally insane, and remembers:

"This night the Northern Lights came out to help me see. The great Nanook comes to eat my seal blubber bait. I take my harpoon with the long walrus tusk spearhead. My aim is true, and Nanook dies. We have his thick, warm fur to keep us warm. The dogs eat, and they are happy and play in the snow."

These thoughts from his past are pinched off by the sharp pains in his head from too many Skid Row beatings and too much drink. He remembered when they told him he could leave the prison for the hospital and he could hardly hold back the tears:

"I was desperate for treatment, anything that would slow my spinning head, set it straight for once and for all. There was a slim chance they could fix it, and I could live in happiness, free again. I hoped they could."

They didn't. He is not better and although he is not in the hospital now, the bad things go on happening.

Anthony Apakark Thrasher is a Canadian Eskimo who was born near the Mackenzie River Delta on the Arctic coast. He was one of the youngest in a family of twenty-one children and was brought up in the traditional Eskimo way. At 19 years of age, though, he and some of his friends were convinced to go to southern Canada and take a job training course by a government man who told him that the old days were gone forever. In the city of Edmonton, Thrasher then began to watch white men and try to imitate their customs. He slicked his hair down with Noxema skin cream, brushed his teeth with shaving lather and washed his face with mouthwash. He chewed laxatives thinking they were candy. He was billeted in a Skid Row hotel without any money and so he was thrown in with pimps and hookers and bums and drunks and started learning their ways. Unfortunately he never stopped, and then it was one jail after another, and finally prison and an institution for the criminally insane. Strangely though, Tony Thrasher was able to write it all down, most of it while awaiting trial on a murder charge. He wrote it in pencil on thousands of scraps of paper. And he continued writing during his prison term. Calgary lawyer, William Stilwell, who defended Thrasher in his case, encouraged him to write his story and then had it printed in the form of this book.

It is a tragic story both from a personal and a cultural point of view. Thrasher says:

"We can never go back. We, the Eskimo people are like sun spots which sometimes appear on the lens of an astronomer. We are in the way, we blur the picture the white man has of the future of the North. I see us starving while others get rich from the oil and mineral resources, crushed by the emerging giant like a page out of Eskimo mythology."

He ends his book with another prediction and a challenge. The quest for oil in the Arctic, he says, "will destroy our trapping and hunting on the ice. Water and air pollution will eventually destroy the foxes, seals and polar bears. The fish and the whales will be gone from the Arctic Ocean. Finally, the Eskimos will be gone. I say for the last time. We have been silent too long."