

Book should be read a few pages a day

by Wally Olson

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The Island Within by Richard K. Nelson. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1989. \$18.95

JUNEAU — Dick Nelson has spent more than 25 years learning from the environment and people of Alaska, and in that quarter century he has learned many things. He has discovered plants, animals, storms, high seas, Eskimos, Indians. In this book he shows how he has discovered himself and his world.

The title, *The Island Within*, is taken from Nelson's belief that over many years, he has fed from a specific island, and his body is formed from that food. But more importantly, the island has nourished him spiritually, and now he feels and sees himself as part of that piece of the world.

"The earth and sea flow in my blood; the free wind breathes through me; the clear sky gazes out from within my eyes. These eyes that see the island are also made from it; these hands that write of the island are also

made from it; and the heart that loves the island has something of the island's heart inside.

How did all of this come about? Nelson came to Alaska as a student with no knowledge of hunting and butchering animals. He was soon immersed in the daily life of Eskimo based on hunting and fishing. Here was a place where you couldn't drive to the local supermarket to buy your hamburger or sandwich. If you didn't catch fish, kill a caribou or seal and butcher them out for human consumption, you and your family starved.

He then lived among the people of the Interior, those whom others call Athabascans. His personal knowledge and spirituality expanded both in range and depth. It was like growing up all over again.

The Island Within is more than a reflective look at life in Southeastern, it is Nelson's thoughts about himself and the world he lives in. He repeatedly refers to the wisdom of the Koyukon Indians. At first, their way of life with its subsistence hunting and fishing by descendants of the first Americans, ap-

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pears to be rather simple.

Nelson shows that it is a rich source of understanding and guidance for modern man.

In his early books, Nelson's writing was typical of the trained academician writing for others like himself. Over the years he has matured as a writer with a style and command of the language that captures the readers attention and imagination.

I first read this book, as I do many others, from cover to cover in a short period of time. But that was like gulping down caviar. The best way to read *The Island Within* is to take a few pages a day and read them slowly, then set the book aside and come back to it the next day. It is filled with gems of insight and understanding. Another

anthropologist told me that he thought in many places it was too "personal" and "intimate."

No, this is Nelson telling his story of his feelings, his response to a death in the family, his ambivalence between gently caressing and killing a deer, his dismay at the destruction of the environment in the name of progress and money. This is how he sees the world.

The Island Within isn't really anthropology, it is not mere biography, it is not a sermon, it is Dick Nelson describing his response to the world of birds, plants, fish, deer and humans in light of what he has learned from the Native people of Alaska over the past quarter century.

But Nelson is also a good teacher. What he is doing is baring his soul to the world so that others may accept or reject what he has to say. Like a good teacher, a reader can't just walk away from what he says; you have to think about it.

If you enjoy thinking, good writing, the world around you in Alaska, then I think you will enjoy *The Island Within*.