

Review:

***Flight of the Goose: A Story of the Far North* by Lesley Thomas**

**Review by Jack Dalton,
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It is difficult to be an ambassador, especially between two unbelievably different worlds. In this case, it is the modern world and the world of the Inupiat Eskimo of Northwestern Alaska of not so long ago. Between these two worlds, everything is different: Language, communication (that which is beyond language alone), philosophies, customs, morals, values, spirituality, food, relationship with the environment around us, ways of seeing the world, ways of interacting with the world, roles of men and women, community, privacy, ownership, ways of education, measures of intelligence, houses, transportation, medicine, and even the way in which one takes a crap. Everything is different.

So, to be an ambassador between these two worlds is a daunting, even hellish task. There are so many ways in which to screw up, offend, misinterpret, misrepresent, and confuse.

And it is one thing to be Native and to try and bridge the Native culture with the modern one.

But it is even more significant when a non-Native, a *nuluagmiu*, tries to assume this role. The knife-edge upon which they must walk only gets sharper and sharper and sharper.

However, Lesley Thomas seems to be the perfect ambassador. And her novel, *Flight of the Goose*, is a truly glorious manifesto.

What helps is that Lesley is not Native, so she understands the language, the ways, the thought processes of the non-Native world. But then, in many ways, she is Native. She was adopted by a Native family, well known, recognized and respected elders of the Bering Straits region. And she must have been lucky enough to have a desire to pay attention and see below the surface of what she was taught about the “Ways of the Eskimo”, to have an amazing understanding of what it meant, what it means and what it may mean.

Whenever I see a story, a book, about Alaska Natives, and I see it was written by a non-Native person, I immediately become suspect. Who are *these* people? Who are they to think they can write about us? Who are they to think they know? Who are they to think they can see below the surface to what is *really* going on, to what is really the truth? And even after I am told that this person or that “learned” from Native elders, has lived with “the people”, I am still suspect. After all, I am of the Yup'ik culture and would never assume to “know” in a way that I could write a definitive novel about “the North”, its people and its history.

And yet, I am open, I want to give that person, that story, a chance.

This is the mindset in which I began to read *Flight of the Goose*.

How quickly I realized I had no reason to be suspect.

Oh, certainly, there were places where the fur on my back stood up and I growled, but the more I read, the more I began to understand the purpose of each idea, of each word. I was supposed to have that reaction

It is this that makes Lesley Thomas such a brilliant ambassador. She begins knowing exactly how far apart these two worlds are. But, instead of trying to mash these two worlds together and make them get along, she uses all the bad history, all the misunderstanding, all of the differences to her advantage, and in the end, to our advantage.

Whether Native or not, we must recognize our own prejudice, our own thoughts and ideas, and be angry with the prejudice, thoughts and ideas of “them”. But, in *Flight of the Goose*, Thomas slowly peels those prejudices, thoughts and ideas away. And slowly, we see innocent misunderstanding instead of prejudicial malice, we see like ideas expressed in different ways instead of completely different thoughts and ideas that could never understand each other. Slowly, we see how alike we are than how different.

This does not mean, however, that being aware of this knowledge will do us any good. For anyone can read a book, hear a story. It is what you do afterward that is important. It is how you work this knowledge into your life that will be the true testament, the true way in which to honor a good story.

Perhaps in the end, this is the difference between the old ways and the new ways, whether Native or not. In the old ways, you searched out every story for wisdom and ate it to make you fat, to help you survive the winter of life. Nowadays, we tend to eat stories like popcorn and candy, it is enjoyable, but they are empty calories and the fat no longer protects us, but kills us. We are entertained, but we choose not to learn -- a fatal mistake.

At this point, it doesn't really matter how good a book this is. I know now that you will read this story, read this book. But remember, the point isn't to *read* this book, it is to make yourself a better person after the end of it. This is the only way to honor this story. It is the only way to honor the work and wisdom of Lesley Thomas . . . Native, or not.