

Smiler's Bones Reviews

1.

Kirkus, 3/15/05, Vol. 73, No. 6, p. 354:

In 1897, explorer Robert Peary brought six Eskimos from their home in Greenland and put them on display at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Among them were a father and son, Qisuk (“Smiler”) and Minik. Four, including Smiler, succumbed to disease, one returned home, and Minik was left alone, stranded in New York City for 12 years. Lerangis offers a hugely fascinating novel, closely based on the true story. The writing is vivid, the description of New York City by a boy who had never even seen a tree before is particularly brilliant. And the inner life of Minik is effectively rendered as he watches everyone he loves become sick and die, sees his father’s bones on display at the museum, and becomes miserably alone. Though Lerangis’s narrative of shifting time frames and perspectives precludes mounting tension and escalating drama, it’s a compelling and important story nonetheless.

2.

School Library Journal, 6/1/05, p. 161:

In 1897, Arctic explorer Robert Peary took six Polar Eskimos to New York City to be part of a living exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History. In a series of flashbacks, the youngest “specimen,” eight-year-old Minik, tells the tale of his journey to New York and the fate of his father, Qisuk, called “Smiler.” The wide-eyed boy experiences candy and circus visits, happily unaware that he is a curio for public display. When his father and three others die of pneumonia, the exhibit is closed and Uncle Will, a benevolent museum curator, becomes his new guardian. Chapters alternate between the naive young Minik and the mature teenager who has trouble coping with the bizarre circumstance of his youth and feelings of isolation. He is devastated to learn that he has been betrayed by Uncle Will, who has allowed Qisuk’s skeleton to be macerated and kept in the museum as an artifact, rather than properly buried. The first-person point of view works well as Minik ages, and vivid dreams keep him tied to his family. By juxtaposing chapters, the depressed and cynical teen contrasts sharply with the innocent child brought up in a trusting Eskimo culture. Minik is an unforgettable character, and issues of racism and scientific arrogance will not be lost on readers. — Vicki Reutter.

3.

Booklist, 4/1/05, Vol. 101, No. 15, p. 1354:

In this wrenching first novel, based on true events, Lerangis gives voice to Minik, an Eskimo boy who, along with his father and several other villagers, was delivered to New York by Arctic explorer Robert Peary “in the interest of science.” First they are put on display at the Museum of Natural History; then consumption strikes: “Four days, four eskimos. Dead, dead, dead, dead.” A kind family takes the orphan in, but as he matures, his sense of displacement intensifies — especially after his efforts to claim his father’s remains and obtain passage back to Greenland are repeatedly thwarted. Minik recalls his story in flashbacks, describing his first impressions of “civilization” (skyscrapers are “igloos stacked high like icebergs”), then shifting to his adolescence, when his resentment toward Peary took deep root. A somewhat rushed finale brings its now-19-

year-old hero to the brink of despair and, finally, to a point of equilibrium. Although the nonlinear narrative may prove disorienting to many readers, the incisive emotions are unforgettable — all the more because they are culled from historical fact — Jennifer Mattson

4.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, June 2005, Vol. 58, No. 10, p. 446
(RECOMMENDED rating)

Minik was six years old in 1897, when he and five other Eskimos, including his father, were brought to New York by famed explorer Robert Peary; four Eskimos, including Minik's father, soon died, and one returned to Greenland, leaving Minik to be raised alone in New York (mostly in the care of the family of William Wallace, the superintendent of the Museum of Natural History). Now nineteen years old, a troubled Minik arrives in Quebec City, hoping, after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, to find transport back to Greenland—and to elicit the return of his father's bones, which were not, as young Minik had been assured, buried with reasonable attention to tradition but instead put on display in the museum. The book deftly interweaves Minik's past and present into a haunting chronicle of a boy caught between two worlds ("My heart is still that of a Smith Sound Eskimo, and there I live with the comfort of snow, the excitement of the hunt, and the extremeness of light and dark. But my brain is, I'm afraid to say, a New Yorker's. And I feel my soul, like the winter sun, slipping, slipping, below the horizon"). Ultimately, though, Lerangis conceives and creates this as a tale of hard-won resilience and hope rather than annihilation, and the darkness is counterbalanced with human goodness and touches of quiet humor. The book is straightforward about the destruction wrought in the name of exploration and science, but the moral assessments are nuanced; there's no cultural adulation of Minik's community and its ways, and "Uncle" Will Wallace, despite being complicit in the museum's mistreatment of Eskimo remains, genuinely loves his foster son. Readers with some historical background will have a tremendous advantage here, since the book limits its contextual explanation and focuses instead on Minik's emotional experience. With this perspective, the story brings moving echoes of Ishi, Ota Benga, and others who've struggled with being representatives of a lifeway to which they can never return, as well as being a compelling chronicle of one young man's almost overwhelming experience. An extensive note from Lerangis explains his research and approach to his topic, and a list of relevant books and films is appended. DS

5.

Kliatt, 5/1/05, Vol. 39, No. 3, p. 15

The cover, featuring a small Inuit face peering out soberly, even fearfully, from a fur hood, is perfect for this tale based on the sad experiences of a real-life Inuit boy. In 1897, explorer Robert Peary brought back six Inuit from Greenland to New York City. Minik, who was about seven at the time, and his father, known as Smiler, were among them. Soon, however, four died of consumption, including Smiler, and one returned, leaving only young Minik.

This novel opens in Quebec City in 1909, with a distraught 19-year-old Minik planning to commit suicide. We then flash back to his childhood in Greenland and early encounters with Peary, whose exotic ways and handy new weapons win over the native people. Lerangis does a great job of conveying how strange New York City appears to a boy who has never even seen a tree, and how the Inuits are treated as curiosities rather than people. They are housed in the American Museum of Natural History, and when they die their corpses are dissected and their bones mounted, Minik eventually discovers to his horror, instead of being buried accordingly to Inuit custom, as they would have him believe.

After his father dies, Minik is brought up by the museum superintendent, Will Wallace. However, eventually Wallace loses his job and Minik loses his home. At the end of the story, he manages to return to Greenland, though an Author's Note reveals that Minik was unable to fit back into his native culture, and returned to the US. He worked in a New Hampshire logging camp and died of the Spanish flu in 1918. He never did recover his father's bones.

This historical fiction succeeds in making Minik and his plight come to life, revealing how he was exploited and illuminating a dark corner of history. It's a more sophisticated tale than its brief length might imply, and thoughtful readers will appreciate its message about respecting other cultures and how it feels to belong nowhere. — Paula Rohrlick

J--Recommended for junior high school students. The contents are of particular interest to young adolescents and their teachers.

S--Recommended for senior high school students.

6.

ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, of the National Council of Teachers of English), Summer 2005:

Much as Mene hears the calling of his father's spirit to return home in *Smiler's Bones*, Peter Lerangis felt the calling to breathe life into history by recreating the emotional experiences of this young Eskimo. Mene was the sole survivor of six native Eskimos transplanted to America at the turn-of-the-century by the famed explorer Robert Peary. Records indicate Mene was bounced among caretakers, contemplated suicide, and publicly threatened the Museum of Natural History for his exploitation. However, the person behind the headlines had yet to be discovered until this novel.

Swept from the icy white arctic to the industrial prowess of New York, readers share in Mene's account of both the Eskimo people's bold journey south and the tumultuous repercussions felt after their relocation.

Eloquent descriptions, historical basis, complex character development, ethical dilemmas and cultural exploration make this novel an excellent addition to any classroom and a great read. — Elaine A. Cobb

7.

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates), Vol. 28, No. 3, 8/1/05

Minik is one of six Eskimos coaxed from their primitive homes by explorer Robert Peary in 1897. Qisuk (“Smiler”) is Minik’s father who sees the trip to America as an opportunity until they reach their final destination—as part of a living exhibit inside New York’s American Museum of Natural History. In slightly more than ninety days’ time, four of the six Eskimos, including Smiler, are dead—unable to fight against exposure to American diseases. One returns to Greenland, leaving Minik to survive alone in this completely foreign land. Minik does not speak English, does not understand American ways, has never seen a city, has never used a fork, and has never seen his own reflection in a mirror. Poor Minik is deceived and neglected but is eventually cared for by an adoptive family. Throughout his life, however, he seems to lose, one by one, every person he holds dear. Based on Minik’s actual experiences, this wonderful historical fiction adventure tale follows this Eskimo from his departure with Peary through his amazing and bizarre young life to his ultimate return home. Students will be riveted by this story and shocked at the treatment that Minik and his compatriots received. The flashback-flash-forward format might confuse some, but this compelling story will keep readers interested until the last page. It is a recommended purchase for both school and public libraries, especially for those collections in which the nonfiction *Give Me My Father’s Body: The Life of Minik, the New York Eskimo* by Kenn Harper (Archway/Pocket, 2001) circulates well. — Kimberly Paone

8.

Children's Literature

Exploitation and assimilation intertwine in this provocative historical novel based on real people and events and grounded in culturally-accurate research. Six-year-old Minik becomes isolated from his Greenland community when explorer Robert Peary convinces several Polar Eskimos, including Minik and his father, Qisuk, known as Smiler, to travel to New York City in 1897. Minik endures overwhelming losses and misunderstandings as scientists interfere with his identity and culture. Comforted by Qunualuq, his sealskin doll, Minik struggles to survive as the Eskimos are presented for public viewing at the American Museum of Natural History where they live. Disease kills all the Eskimos except Minik who insists that his father be buried according to Eskimo customs in order for Smiler’s spirit to attain peace. Unhappy in the city, orphaned Minik lives in the countryside with the Wallace family, whose kindnesses mitigate many of the indignities he suffers. At school, Minik is confronted with news that the Smiler’s skeleton was appropriated for scientific investigations. Haunted by this betrayal, he runs away and exposes Peary’s unethical behavior. Returning to Greenland after twelve years, Minik discovers that he exists in limbo as part Eskimo, part New Yorker. The author’s concluding notes reveal what happened to Minik. Pair this title with Mette Newth’s *The Abduction* for social studies discussions examining indigenous peoples being forced to conform to alien cultures and definitions of civilization. 2005, Scholastic, \$16.95. Ages 12 up. — Elizabeth D. Schafer

9.

Hornbook Guide to Children, January 01, 2006:

In 1897, seven-year-old Minik, along with five other members of his Eskimo community, is tricked into becoming a living museum exhibit in New York. After the others (including his father) die, he lives between worlds for twelve years before finally gaining passage home. Spare writing and a strong sense of time and place anchor this fictionalized account.

10.

Canadian Review of Materials, University of Manitoba, Vol. XIII, No. 3, September 29, 2006:

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excerpt:

We are taken to a massive stone igloo standing alone in a place called the West Side. The nearest buildings seem to be shunning it, clustered far away behind an elevated track. I nickname the igloo Qivitoq Building. I will not be able to pronounce its real name — the New York Museum of Natural History — for quite some time.

We are taken to the basement and given a room there. On the positive side, I am at last in a place where I can take off my clothes and run around. On the negative side, I am told by a woman named Margaret that I must sit in a bathtub with water as warm as spit...

She tries to edge closer, holding a brush and a towel. I circle the tub, keeping it between us. When her back is to the wall, mine is to the door - and I run... At the end of the hall I see an open room. But inside it is a man draping a skin over a frame, trying to re-create an animal.

I watch him for a moment, baffled. "Why did you skin it in the first place?" ... I sprint around a corner and see a grating above me. This means I am near our living quarters. Museum goers come to the grating to peer at us. Lying on their stomachs, they wave to us and drop scraps of food.

Peter Lerangis weaves an intricate, haunting, and unique tale based on historical events. Smiler's Bones unfolds with finely wrought, relentless pacing; it is a rich quilt of fact and fiction that will captivate readers, even hard-to-reach boys.

The story opens with 19-year-old Minik, who's destitute, ill, and searching for an opportunity to jump off a balcony in Montreal. Through flashbacks, Minik narrates the story of his journey from Smith Sound, Greenland, to New York City in 1893. Minik was three-years-old when American Explorer Robert Peary took him, his father Qisuk, and four others to the Museum of Natural History as a living exhibit and for scientific tests. Within 96 days of arrival, his companions died of consumption, and Minik was sent to live with the museum superintendent, William Wallace, and his family. Although still in the throes of culture shock and trauma, Minik settled in and managed to pass happy years there, until he discovered that the museum staff faked the burial of his father.

Instead of following rites that would release Qisuk's spirit from angrily walking the earth, the museum staff dissected Qisuk's body and those of the other Eskimos, then had them

macerated in Williams' plant so the bones could be displayed. Minik runs away, absolutely horrified, and attempts suicide.

Lerangis' use of first person makes the story immediate, personal, and accessible. His timing is masterful, particularly the foreshadowing done on micro and macro levels. For example, Lerangis first describes Peary with eyes "the color of ice," indicating with a single phrase that Peary is frigid, unforgiving, and devoid of warmth, as he appears throughout the book. The story's structure is also carefully planned. Lerangis deftly prepares the reader by providing information early in the book that will assist the reader in seeing through Minik's eyes. An example is the description of the ceremony and traditions carried out for Minik's mother's death in Greenland. This description helps the reader understand the impact of the riteless deaths and burial in New York.

The sparse, lean text suggests major themes (cultural belonging, racism, objectification, culture clash, power imbalance, and historical methods in anthropology) but leaves the reader to connect the dots. The book drips with the whites' condescension towards the Eskimos, yet Minik tells his story without over sentimentalizing. For example, Minik and the other Eskimos are displayed upon arrival in New York, made to wear their heavy bearskin coats despite the heat, required to shake hands and say "TANK YOU" when the fancily-dressed New Yorkers give them candy and peanuts. Lerangis sets the scene so that readers understand the racism and objectification inherent in the situation without any additional commentary on his part. Lerangis also introduces the concept of culture clash through his treatment of status. He presents the clash from Minik's perspective, leaving readers to compare with the societal rules they know. Peary orders the Eskimos around, and the Eskimos do his bidding "because pleasing our guests is just our way."

The Eskimos don't consider themselves as lower status to Peary; instead, they operate in a completely different system of rules. The Eskimos are not invested in Peary's social system, but they cannot escape its prejudice.

Smiler's Bones is captivating the first time and becomes more engrossing with every re-reading. Teens will take the most from the book, and children in grades 5 and up will enjoy and appreciate it since Minik's story reverberates on many levels. An excellent book for classroom use, one that is not at all didactic.

Highly Recommended.

— Jennifer Caldwell is a youth librarian at Richmond Public Library in BC.

11.

The Trinidad Guardian, October 12, 2009:

Last week, literature buffs celebrated the announcement of the 2009 Booker Prize for Hilary Mantel and the Nobel Prize for Literature to Herta Mueller. While most of the world discovered these two award-winning authors, I found myself celebrating another great writer: my latest discovery, Peter Lerangis. Lerangis wrote *Smiler's Bones*, a horrific, unimaginable tale of exploration and exploitation. It is the haunting story of six Eskimos taken from their homes in Greenland by explorer Robert Peary. The explorer

“presented” these innocent people to the American Museum of Natural History where they were kept as a live exhibit. Minik, one of the Eskimos taken by Peary, narrates this biographical novel. Flashbacks rooted in nostalgia for the cold, simple world of Greenland Minik left behind are juxtaposed with stark images of the cold, complex world of New York City. Together they create a sad picture of Minik grappling with the challenges and confusion of his new life. Minik experiences a range of emotions from excitement and curiosity to fear and sadness.

Initially, he is curious about Peary, who collects animals and eventually people from Greenland. Minik longs to make the trip to New York, but his excitement turns to confusion and sadness after he arrives and eventually realises he is nothing more than a curiosity for gawking patrons. Then comes the brutal fear for his own survival as the Eskimos succumb to horrific diseases, tuberculosis and consumption, that they had never seen or experienced in Greenland. Minik, too sick to travel, cannot go with the other Eskimos taken from New York City to the countryside for cleaner air. Minik thinks the move is meant to save his family, but he eventually realises that the motive is not altruistic. *Smiler's Bones* then becomes a story of survival that deals with the cruelty and unfairness that all minorities face. *Smiler's Bones* raises important questions about how far the boundaries of “science” should go. In the case of the Eskimos, what is science and what is exploitation? Minik's story is extreme, but it is a story anyone who crosses cultural boundaries can relate to. There is a sad truth in the fact that many people who leave their own culture end up straddling two cultures at best.

Most end up in the abyss of a no-man's land as Minik did. They never feel comfortable when they return home, and they never quite feel that their new culture is really their own. After Minik's fascinating tale, the author explains how he stumbled on the story of Peary's six Eskimos while on vacation in New England. He tells the real story of Minik and how he created a biographical novel from that story. He clarifies what are actual facts in the story and what was imagined. This is a valuable piece of information for budding literary critics. There's an extensive bibliography along with a question and answer section with the author that also adds much information about the creative process. A section with interesting facts about Greenland says that football is Greenland's national sport, but the country does not belong to any international football federation because Greenland cannot meet the requirement of having natural turf for players. Greenland is not green. It's an icy tundra. Lerangis says he set out to tell the story of “...how it feels to see a city emerge from the fog when you've never in your life even seen a tree. To be put on display before a procession of 30,000 people. To watch as your entire family slowly succumbs to diseases that did not exist in your world.

To grow up, play, go to school, and fall in love not just as a member of a minority group, but as the only one. To discover, at age 11, that the most important event of your life was a fraud, and the person you loved most part of it. To desperately seek a way home and find all routes closed.” The author intended the book for nine to 14-year-olds, but there's really no age limit when it comes to appreciating or identifying with the themes of love, trust and security. I now count Peter Lerangis among my favourite authors. He's right up there with Cynthia Kadohata, Joan Hiatt Harlow, Lois Lowry and Louis Sachar—all writers for students eight to 14. Their novels can be appreciated by all teenagers and adults as well. Lerangis' writing is edgy: he's not afraid of difficult and even horrific subject matter. He uses clipped, abrupt sentences to create tension. He carries readers to

deep, dark places. This is a very teachable book for Form One students. Lerangis is highly respected in creative circles. Teenagers and adults might best know Lerangis for his screen adaptations of two movies: *The Sixth Sense* with Bruce Willis and *Batman Begins*. *Smiler's Bones* is a Scholastic book that is available at amazon.com. Once again, it's good to know, even in a week of prestigious awards like the Booker Prize and Nobel Prize for Literature, that young readers have books to read that are noteworthy in their own right.

Thoughts:

Smiler's Bones is the haunting story of six Eskimos taken from their homes in Greenland by explorer Robert Peary. *Smiler's Bones* raises important questions about how far the boundaries of "science" should go. Lerangis' writing is edgy: he's not afraid of difficult and even horrific subject matter. — Debbie Jacob