Rudy Wiebe faces north and encoun

Do you know yourself?
So little you know of yourself!
While dawn gives place to dawn,
And spring is upon the village.
Unaya --- unaya.

- Orpingalik,
from *Playing Dead*
by Rudy Wiebe

Rudy Wiebe's latest book, *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*, is a collection of essays about Canada's North. In a sense, each essay asks the question, "Do you know yourself?" And the answer for many Canadians is, "So little you know of yourself!" A major reason for this lack of knowing or understanding is our failure, as a nation, to acknowledge the significance of the North to the rest of Canada. We do not understand the rich history and culture and mystery of the people of the North — we tend to face south rather than north. In *Playing Dead*, Rudy Wiebe, one of Canada's major writers and a Governor General's award winner, faces north in an attempt to uncover stories and secrets from the North's history. The essays in *Playing Dead* reveal a sharp eye and keen ear for the details that may lead to greater understanding. In a recent interview, Rudy Wiebe spoke about his new book, and about his approach to the task of writing. In all of his writing, whether it be novels or short stories or essays, Rudy Wiebe looks for the unique angle, the complexity and the mystery beneath the apparently smooth surface.

After a number of trips to the North, Wiebe has discovered this complexity and mystery in the Inuit people's way of life. He is fascinated by the civilization that has developed there over thousands of years. "Once you begin to understand their wonderful nomadic hunting civilization and the way they developed their clothing, their food, and their shelters, and realize how superbly everything is adapted to live there, it's stunning. The civilization is at least as unique and as striking as the Egyptians or the Assyrians."

What Wiebe finds especially striking is the cultural life of the Inuit — a culture with a rich history of poetry, songs, and stories. *Playing Dead* explores, among other things, the mystery of such a rich culture in what appears to be a vast, barren land. Wiebe argues that the rich Inuit traditions of story-telling and singing and dancing exist because of the landscape, not in spite of it. He explains how and when the people would get together for these cultural events.

"In the long darkness during the winter months they get together, and that is the time for festivals. This was the civilization that they developed. Between the middle of November and the end of January, you don't live in isolation. You move together with a lot of other people and you sing and you dance. And it's a great communal time... There is such a wonderful humanity there, which quite denies what we think of as the brutality or the dreadfulness of the landscape in which they live. It is as warm and as human and as insightful as anything you'll ever encounter."

Of course there is another side to life in the North, and Wiebe is fully aware of it. He mentions some of the social problems in passing, but as he says, "I'm not talking about the drinking and the social disruption, and the dreadful kind of society that shows itself in the small communities. That's there and I don't doubt it, but I'm not talking about that [in this book]. There are other times to talk about that. I'm talking about something more fundamental. That's just a kind of sore or warble fly on a massive, powerful beast."

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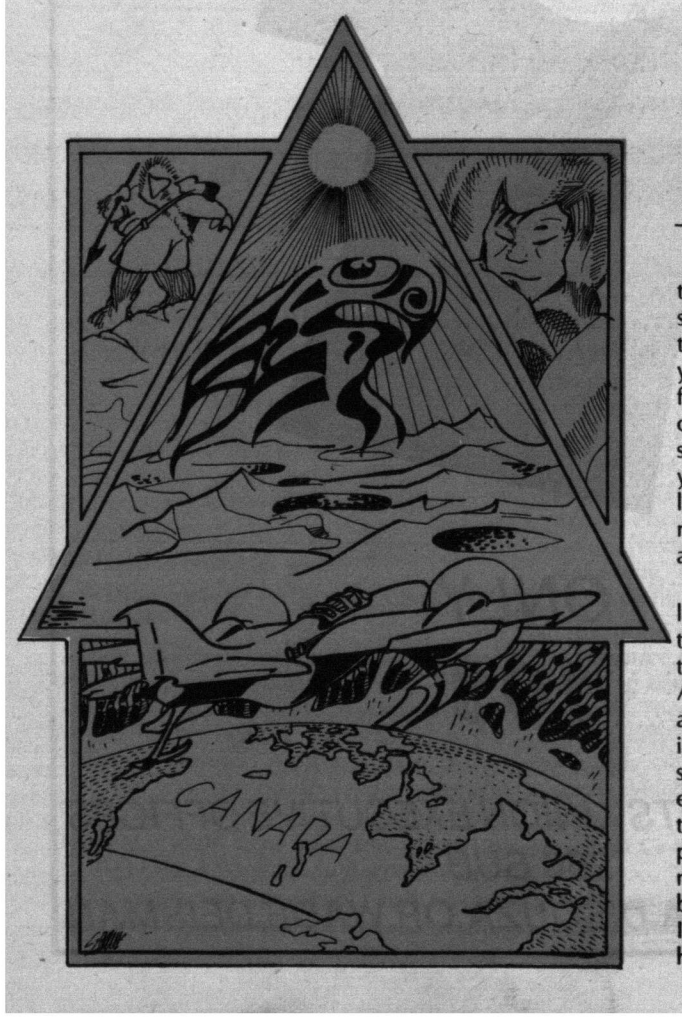
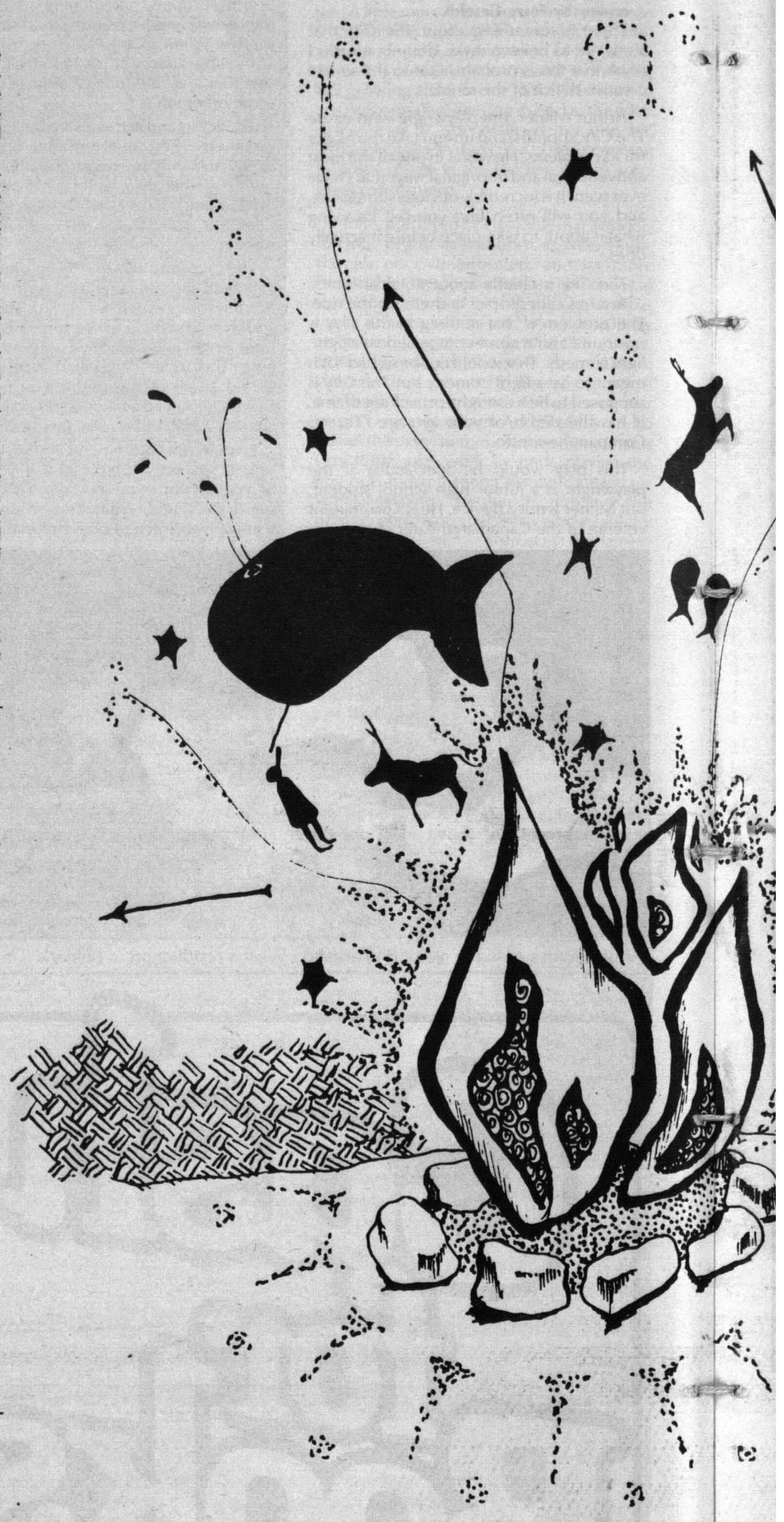


In fact, Wiebe is quite critical of much of the media today that seems to concentrate solely on this darker side of the North. "If there's a terrible bout of AIDS up there, or if you suddenly discover that an entire village is full of incest and drunkenness, then of course the newspapers rush in there and show you that picture. But they never show you the larger picture of what that world is like, and that's what I think writers like myself need to do — to go up there and live there and see that larger picture."

But it is not just the media that misses the larger picture, it is most of us living south of the Arctic. We have a hard time believing that Edmonton could be south of anything. As Wiebe says, "We think of it [the Arctic] as an empty land; it's not empty at all. It's inhabited by all those hundreds and thousands of people that have lived there for eight or nine thousand years. You go up there and the first thing you think is, how can people love a landscape like this? You can be mystified and terrified by it, and be intrigued by it, but love it? Never leave it? This is partly, I think, one of the things that white men have to try and get a hold of."

In the last essay of *Playing Dead*, Wiebe touches on this point about our failure to recognize the North for what it is. "Canadians have so little comprehension of our own *nordicity*, that we are a northern nation and that, until we grasp imaginatively and realize imaginiatively in word, song, image and consciousness that North is both the true nature of our world and also our graspable destiny, we will always go whoring after the mocking palm trees and beaches of the Caribbean and Florida and Hawaii; will always be wishing ourselves something we aren't, always stand staring south across that mockingly invisible border..." (111).

Playing Dead, then, is Wiebe's attempt to "realize imaginatively" that North — or true North, as he says elsewhere — "is our graspable destiny." Fundamental to all of the essays in *Playing Dead* is a sense of facing



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