

The Snow Walker

The Snow Walker, Farley Mowat, Bantam-Seal Books, 1977.

by Judith Pratt

Farley Mowat's latest fiction, a collection of stories entitled *The Snow Walker*, resembles most a session within one of the snow houses he describes, where the Inuit elder closes his eyes and embarks on numerous tales of past courage and defeat. In fact, many of the eleven stories are modelled in this fashion, and Mowat succeeds in creating the atmosphere conducive to such story-telling.

Where Mowat fails though, is in the tales themselves. There is no embellishment, and hence the stories that emerge are dry and uninspiring, certainly not the work of an author heralded as one of Canada's greatest storytellers. There is a distinct lack of passion and vitality in almost all the tales and even the injection of Eskimo mysticism fails to rouse any response. The characters are described mostly within the narration and the dialogue is very sparse and insufficient. There is a definite undercurrent of alien mysticism, yet the superficial swells of the weak narration tend to obscure the presence of the omniscient northern gods.

The first tale concerns snow. Mowat describes it as "the Master Titan" and throughout the rest of the stories, this fourth element pervades all with a fierce intensity, which at times can be the ally of man, and at others can bring slow death, and, at the least, discomfort. In this first tale, Mowat declares that "a glacier is the macrocosmic form of snow. But in its microcosmic forms, snow epitomizes ethereal beauty." It is this element

which, in the final story, "Dark Odyssey of Soosie", brings death to six people in an igloo buried under thirty-four feet of snow. In some of Mowat's best narration, this snow brings characters and stories to a valorous climax, but at other times the snow is merely a background for one-dimensional activity, which in total tends to mar any native intensity the author may have been aiming at. The life and spirit of the northern peoples is glimpsed but is never captured in these works, in which the reader is constantly reminded of the Eskimo and his plight, yet never really sees beneath the bulky clothing or into the trying life governed by the elements of the north.

The final story, "Dark Odyssey of Soosie", is a notable exception and best exemplifies the narrative skills Mowat is most lauded for. In this, he combines introspection, character development, narrative description, and the accidents of time with skill and insight, escaping from the blandness of the previous tales. Framed within an historical perspective, the story unfolds with comprehension and clarity and, unlike the preceding works, deals with the northern peoples' emotions while injecting sporadically the responses, whether sympathetic or hostile, of the intruding white man. There is a sense of balance in this tale which compels the reader to probe and empathize, and which makes such a statement as "the time had come where men, women and children . . . should be made to pay for the essential crime of failing to be born as one of us" resound as a wail, rather than as a flat, over-used statement of the condition of the northern native people. Unfortunately for the reader, the



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preceding ten stories, too reminiscent of Jack London's work, and written presumably to provide flesh for the publisher and author, accompany this one vivid, throbbing tale which reflects the vitality

and innocence of the Eskimo. Had Mowat written even four such tales, his *Snow Walker* would have been notable. As it stands, the work is a poor representative of the narrative skills Farley Mowat can be capable of.

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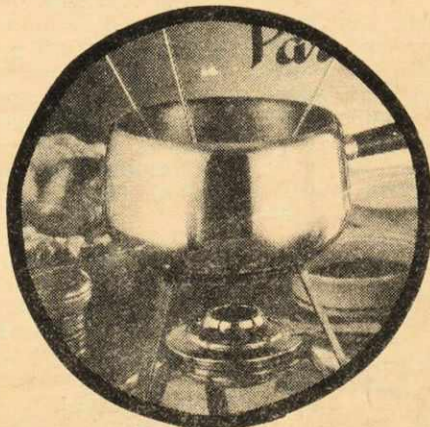
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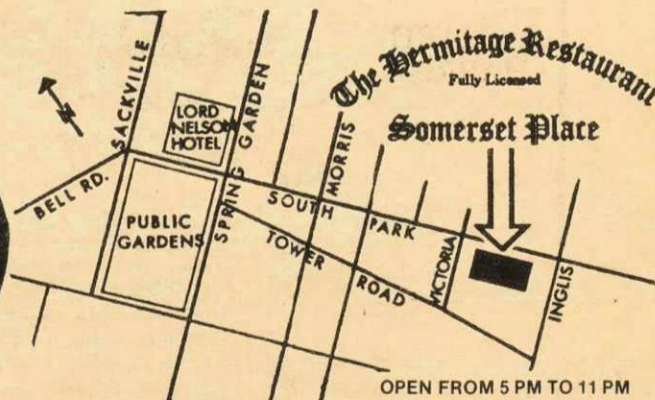


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