



# **Inukshuk**

*Gregory Spatz*

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John Franklin has moved his fifteen-year-old son to the remote northern Canadian town of Houndstitch to make a new life together after his wife, Thomas' mother, left them. Mourning her disappearance, John, a high school English teacher, writes poetry and escapes into an affair, while Thomas withdraws into a fantasy recreation of the infamous Victorian-era arctic expedition led by British explorer Sir John Franklin. With teenage bravado, Thomas gives himself scurvy so that he can sympathize with the characters in the film of his mind--and is almost lost himself.

While told over the course of only a few days, this gripping tale slips through time, powerfully evoking a modern family in distress and the legendary Franklin crew's descent into despair, madness, and cannibalism on the Arctic tundra.

## **Inukshuk Details**

Date : Published June 19th 2012 by Bellevue Literary Press (first published June 12th 2012)

ISBN : 9781934137420

Author : Gregory Spatz

Format : Paperback 220 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction

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# From Reader Review Inukshuk for online ebook

## Suniru says

Inukshuk is a very creative story of a father and son, each lonely after being essentially abandoned by their wife / mother. The loss of the mother is the epicentre of the story. Thomas, 15 years old and obsessed with the 19th century Franklin expedition of the Arctic, recreates the hardships encountered by the ill-fated sailors through his imagination and by playing with his health. He tries to control what he can, his body and thoughts, amidst many changes beyond the control of a child. This is his coming of age. John, his father also finds refuge in the imagination. We catch him in a mid-life crisis. Both father and son inhabit the same space, home and school, yet are whirling in self-absorbed fantasies.

The book is well written and the characters are interesting. How hopeless this kid's teenage years must seem for him to identify with a doomed Arctic expedition! The cover art deserves mentioning...love the ship through the glass of water. It's perfect for the story.

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## Jen says

It was well-written, and the last 60 or so pages grabbed me a lot more than the rest of it, but I suppose it just wasn't my thing.

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## Amy says

Book: *Inukshuk*

Author: Gregory Spatz

Published: June 2012 by Bellevue Literary Press, 220 pages

Date Read: January 2013

First Line: "He was on lunch duty when it happened, jacketless because of the Chinook wind and composing in his head a line or two about the color of the sky reflected in the wet school-yard pavement, the ice-rimmed, quickly vanishing puddles, clouds whipping past upside down...sun oil water."

Genre/Rating: Literary fiction; 1.5/5 teeth falling out of one's gums due to scurvy (arr, matey)

(Copy provided by the publisher)

Review: This book was on my "I am currently reading this" list on Goodreads for six months. SIX MONTHS.

To be fair, I was only really reading it for about a week of those six months. The rest of the time I was sighing, deeply, thinking about having to read it.

Yes, it's true. The life of a book reviewer is not always fun and games, kiddos. Sometimes we take books to review that hook us with a fascinating blurb and we read them only to find out they just aren't for us. Some reviewers have a rule for this: if they don't like the book, they won't review it. I don't have any such rule. If I took a book, I feel like I need to review it. (That means, people who sent me books like six months or so ago before my free time dwindled away to nothing, that yes, I will be reading and reviewing your books. Eventually. I promise. You will probably have moved onto your next novel by then and my review will mean nothing to you, but I will get to them.)

*Inukshuk* (the title refers to a stone landmark or cairn built by the Native tribes of the Arctic; they were used for navigation purposes, or to possibly mark sacred places. Sadly, this is the most poetic thing in the entire novel, and one of the characters? IS A POET) is about John and Thomas, a father and son who have moved to a barren Canadian town after Jane, John's wife, Thomas' mother, left them to pursue her work-related dream. John teaches; Thomas is an outcast at the school. John dreams of writing and giving his life meaning again, either through said writing or through a newly-rekindled connection with an old flame; Thomas only has passion about two things, convincing the girl he's fooling around with after school to have sex with him, and writing a book about men attempting to discover the Northwest passage. In order to truly live the life of the men in his book, Thomas decides to give himself scurvy. John doesn't notice this, as mired in his own life as he is.

This is truly all that happens in this book.

I didn't care for any of the characters. There was no one I rooted for. John was whiny; Thomas was unparented, so I could see why he was acting the way he did; Thomas' girlfriend had such abysmal self-esteem I just wanted to sit her down and give her a talking-to; John's wife was so flighty I wanted to scream at her that once you reach a certain age, you had RESPONSIBILITIES, dammit, and the book Thomas was writing, which would sometimes begin to take over entire chapters, bored me to tears.

The writing wasn't terrible. The author knows his way around sentence structure and grammar. I think it was the subject matter and the characters. No one had a character arc I was rooting for, and no one truly DID anything. Everyone was stagnant. In cases like this, you are not compelled to pick up the book and keep reading. Hence the reason I, myself, was stagnant, and sat glaring at the book for six months, hating that I had to finish it.

Other reviews for the book online were a lot more gracious than mine; perhaps it's a taste thing, and others like books like this. I'm willing to accept that my tastemaker is broken. It would explain why I live on a diet of Crystal Light and chicken fingers.

However, I don't think I can take too many more books that take me six months to read. I'm not getting any younger, you guys, seriously.

(Originally published at Insatiable Booksluts)

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## **Linny says**

Interior voices of father - high school teacher - and son - attends same school - plus the boy's added voice of the Franklin expedition to the inland passage by Greenland that got stuck in ice - it comes alive for him as he deprives himself of Vit c and develops scurvy in a suicidal self hatred. Both men have girlfriends who play

minor parts. They both come around to growth. Remarkable the the history characters become like the 3rd voice. Read more of Spatz, who teaches at E. WA.

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### **Santa says**

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads. Like my two stars say - It was ok. To be honest, I skimmed through the pages where the boy is plotting his film. I didn't follow the characters on the ship as well as I should have. It didn't interest me.

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### **Casey says**

Loved this. The parallel stories of father and son compliment each other without feeling too similar, or too separate. Place in this novel felt like a third main character, and the descriptions were lush and beautiful.

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### **Kris Dinnison says**

Spatz brings readers a novel of a disintegrating family. John Franklin and his teenage son Thomas are trying to put their lives back together after the departure of John's wife. John attempts to do this through a new teaching job and rekindling things with an old flame. Thomas, on the other hand, keeps his world together through an obsession with the explorer John Franklin and his doomed arctic expedition. Spatz brings together their story lines along with well-researched historical fiction about Franklin's 19th century attempt to find the Northwest Passage, and he does so seamlessly. Readers are transported from present to past and back again, often without realizing they are making the voyage. The writing is beautiful and the story rich.

<http://scribbleandhum.blogspot.com/20...>

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### **William Stanger says**

*Inukshuk* is a book that is worth reading. On the surface it is a story of teenage angst - a son (Thomas) trying to become the person he wants to be, living with his teacher father (John Franklin), who is coming to terms with separation from his wife and life in a new community. But the book also contains a parallel story from real life of the ill-fated Franklin expedition to find the North-West Passage through the Arctic.

Thomas believes that he is directly descended from the historical Franklin, and in his mind and his notebooks he is constructing the story as a movie. He also wants to feel he is part of the story, so he is experimentally trying to give himself scurvy. Through food deprivation and some illicit drug-taking he has hallucinations of some of the Franklin crew.

The book is well written and keeps moving at a regular space, weaving together the stories of the main characters from today with the stories of those from the past. The writing is very descriptive and you can almost feel the chill of the arctic and the pain and despair of the ill-fated sailors, being drawn into the dark

depths of scurvy, starvation and cannibalism.

It's not a long book and there are no wasted words. The ending was good, in that the reader is left with a sense of wondering what comes next, but also knowing that, in some sense, there is the feeling that things will work out well for the main characters.

It was the parallel story of the Franklin expedition that drew me into this book because over the years I have had a fascination with this story. I grew up in Orkney, the birthplace of John Rae, who discovered the fate of the Franklin expedition. Unfortunately, he never received the recognition he should have in his lifetime, because of some of the suggestions he made following his discovery. *Inukshuk* has inspired me to go back to some of those stories and to read up more on this fascinating chapter of history.

I'd heartily recommend this book. If nothing else it is a well-written story, but, as I have written, it is a lot more and is a great weaving together of history and fiction.

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### **Tracy Towley says**

I'm not sure why I didn't love this book. The writing is concise and the dialog is excellently crafted. The story is that of a family living in an area that's completely foreign to me – and largely to them as well – which is a scenario I typically find intriguing. Yet, for some reason, I was underwhelmed with this book.

Maybe it was the angsty teenager, who was so passionate about creating a realistic sea-faring world that he gave himself scurvy and documented his own decline. Perhaps it was the many excerpts from the sea-faring manuscript the son was writing, which were typically dull and rarely added anything relevant to the story.

Or maybe I just couldn't stand the father, who seemed so damn resigned and apathetic to his life, and just generally clueless when it came to the health and well-being of his son.

I would completely understand why someone would like this, because the formula is mostly there. But in the end it just didn't quite work for me.

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### **Lori says**

from publisher

Read 5/29/12 - 6/23/12

3 Stars - Recommended to fans of multiple story lines, Arctic Expeditions, and Vitamin C deficiencies

Pgs: 220

Publisher: Bellevue Press

Every good writer must suffer as those within his story suffer. Become the characters, live as they lived, even if it means avoiding each and every food that contains traces of Vitamin C so you can purposely give yourself scurvy. At least, that is Thomas Franklin's hope.

Thomas - an angsty teenage boy (show me one who isn't) - believes he is a direct descendant of the historical

Franklin from the failed Arctic expedition. He immerses himself in this fantasy, sketching out a movie of the expedition in an attempt to recreate the event, bringing life to the men aboard the ship, discussing it passionately with his father, while avoiding the more difficult conversations of their recent move to a remote northern corner of Canada and his adjustment - or lack thereof - to his parents' separation.

John Franklin - teaching at his son's high school and distracted by an attempt to rekindle an on again/off again affair - tried his best to be the father Thomas needs him to be. He struggles to give his son space, allowing Thomas to revel in his fantasy world of icebergs and cannibalism without pressuring him for too much information.

As Thomas and his father completely miss the point and avoid working towards a more intimate relationship, they become something like passing ships to one another. Thomas is unaware of his father's issues at school while John doesn't notice his son's blatant attempt to beat his body into a bleeding, starving scurvy-ridden shell.

Gregory Spatz uses his novel *Inukshuk* as a platform for many meaningful subplots - which, at times compliment one another very well and at other times appear to work very much against each other. If I'm being honest, at times, I wasn't even sure what the book's main plot was... is it possible for a book to be made up of a series of subplots without ever having committed to one main plot?

There's the overall family drama story arc - you have a father and son, with an absent mother, who struggle to develop and maintain a normal, healthy relationship and tend to work at odds against one another. This story arc is told through two clearly separate means:

The father's side of the story - his inability to let go of the hope that his estranged wife will return, his obsession with Miora (the mother of a boy who beats up his son at school), his inability to find something he and his son can grasp onto, and the fact that he loses himself to his poetry as a means of escaping it all.

And the son's side of the story - the embarrassing crush he has on his younger neighbor, his obsession with the Franklin expedition and the burning desire to write it all out, his devil-may-care attitude regarding school and fitting in with the other kids his age, and the early independence that his father has pushed onto him by not being around.

Within this flip-flop style of writing - while we are immersed in Thomas's side of things - we are given an additional story line... that of the actual events that Thomas is creating and chronicling into a movie format of the Arctic expedition. We meet and read about the two main characters aboard Franklin's ship and the hardships they are facing as they freeze and starve to death in the middle of the ocean.

While Gregory weaves all of this throughout the pages of his novel, he maintains a strict third person narrative. This is perhaps the most jarring aspect of the entire book for me. The overall effect left me feeling disconnected. I had very little empathy for what was taking place in either of their lives. More often than not, I found that I was just reading for the sake of reading.

I'm left wondering how John and Thomas's portions of the story would have come across had they been told in first person. Would I have felt a more vested interest in their individual struggles? Would I have been unable to put the book down because I was dying to know what was going to happen to them next? This is one of the first times that I've ever been painfully aware of a novel's POV. Did Gregory test out different

points of view before settling on this one? Did first person never cross his mind? If it was written in first person, would it have actually accomplished what I longed for - a deeper connection with and growing concern for John and Thomas? I suppose I will never know...

Inukshuk was a valiant effort at mixing history with present day. While it didn't make me want to research Arctic expeditions, or create any sympathy angst for Thomas and love-loss regret for John, it did tell a good story. I imagine history buffs would find much more to appreciate here than I did. I walked away feeling a wee bit of this book went right over my head.

See review with embedded links here: <http://thenextbestbookblog.blogspot.c...>

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### **Linda says**

I would have liked the book better, except for the ending. Seriously, you kid almost dies from a drug overdose and you just make him puke up everything and accept his telling you it is scurvy (yes part of the problem). You don't rush him to emergency? Just a FYI, an overdose of drugs can destroy a kids liver (permanently). Like health care is free in Canada. A visit to the emergency room costs no more than a bit of lost pride. I wanted to bitch-slap the main character for being so self-absorbed that he couldn't even do that right. For deciding that letting his kid find his own way and sort things out was the "adult" thing to do for him. WHAT? So annoyed.

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### **Jeremy says**

Mostly good, but falls short. There are spoilers below, so don't read it unless you've read the book or don't care about spoilers.

There's a lot to like about this book: The theme of both a father and son separately trying to find their direction in life, one who tends to go overboard trying to do things and the other who just waits for things to happen to him. These are good characters and issues in life. The writing is good, mostly. And the parallel story about the failed arctic expedition is really interesting and tragic.

The problems, however, really get in the way of me giving this a very positive score. Firstly, there are editing issues. A contraction with a space in the middle of the word. One section where the POV goes from the son to the father without any transition. It was weird and I wonder if that was an issue with the ebook version and just poor editing, or all versions are like that? Was it a mistake or something intended? There were other editing mistakes, too.

The stories didn't really have enough to them. The Franklin expedition parts were very light on substance. Good, but almost like there wasn't enough research done. The plot with the mother seemed not well developed. I didn't get a sense of what she was really like. The brother that was hardly in the story seemed like an odd addition. Don't get me wrong, the characterizations of the main characters were good...just the other characters were undeveloped, like Spatz didn't really want to put much time into them. And finally, the ending was terrible. Not terrible in a disaster kind of way. But terrible in a half-hearted, lame kind of way. Spelling out the symbolism with the title, lame. Flashing back to the mother and father in college, lame. And the father just deciding how to change his life? Seriously? That just made the whole story kind of trite and



unrealistic. If he went on being a lame, wishy washy guy, that would be realistic. If he did something to show he's changed, that would be formulaic but at least something. But no, Spatz chose to just have him mentally decide things are going to be different. Similarly, the son just decided to change. Lame.

The first half the book really interested me, and in the end I was skimming and the conclusion really was half-hearted. I give it three stars for the good parts.

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## **Meghan says**

This book was so close to having me enjoy it, but there were just so many misplaced details that I just couldn't fall into the story in the way that Spatz intended.

Firstly, the description: a "remote northern Canadian town"? The story takes place on the outskirts of Calgary. There are a million people in Calgary, more than, according to the 2010 US Census, San Jose, San Francisco, or Charlotte. As a former resident of Calgary, I can tell you that no one in Canada considers Calgary to be either remote or northern. If the story had been set in Fort McMurray, I might have accepted the label of northern, but Calgary, no. (Edit: upon discussion with the author, this was put in via the publisher and not himself, so this was a publisher error and not his. Acknowledged and I apologize)

Unfortunately, this is just one of the Americanisms that seems to have slipped into the novel: the school year divided into quarters rather than semesters, using Hershey's to make hot chocolate rather than Nestle (page 123), talking about Québec "seceding from the union" rather than separating from Canada (page 110).

Moreover, John selling his house for a quarter of a million (page 29); if he sold his house in Calgary for only a quarter of a million dollars, he was seriously ripped off. An eight hundred square foot, two bedroom house in my old neighbourhood (Capitol Hill) sold for over \$350 000 two years ago. If they were living in any of the nicer, family oriented neighbourhoods, he should have cleared half a million for a house. (Again, upon conversation with the author, we will agree to disagree on this point, as I have friends in the real-estate game in Calgary who agree with my assessment circa the real-estate market in the mid 2000s. Perhaps the author and I are thinking of vastly different neighbourhoods and, since Calgary is roughly the size of Manhattan in square footage, this might very well be the case.)

So the Canadian errors then soured the rest of the novel for me. I can sense that there's a story there, a meaningful one, but I just can't make myself get there. The long sentences and dense paragraphs also work against any sense of momentum or change or discovery that the novel is reaching for. It's too bogged down, both in style and in subplots (Jill, Devon, bullying, Moira, sleepwalking, is scurvy making him crazy or does he see it, Moira's ex-husband).

Edit until the verbiage is spartan to match the barren landscape of tundra Thomas is so obsessed with, drop the bullying sideline, possibly the superfluous brother as well, and there could be a real gem buried here. As it stands, it's too muddled with too much going on and too many factual errors for it to be truly enjoyable.

Edited: Upon conversation with the author, I've updated some of my concerns above.

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