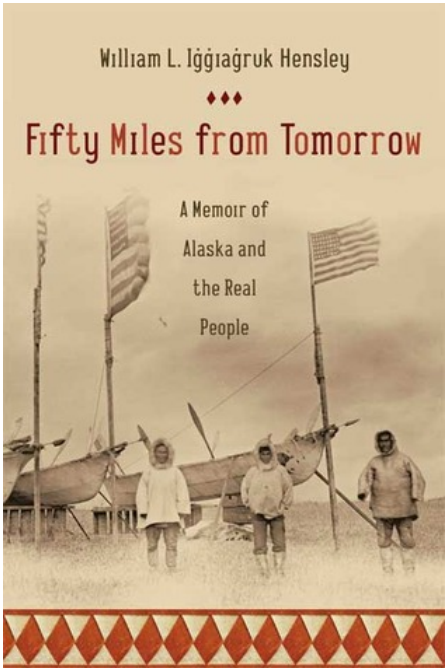

Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People

William L. Iggiagruk Hensley

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Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People William L. Iggiagruk Hensley Nunavut tigummiun!Hold on to the land! It was just fifty years ago that the territory of Alaska officially became the state of Alaska. But no matter who has staked their claim to the land, it has always had a way of enveloping souls in its vast, icy embrace. For William L. Iggiagruk Hensley, Alaska has been his home, his identity, and his cause. Born on the shores of Kotzebue Sound, twenty-nine miles north of the Arctic Circle, he was raised to live the traditional, seminomadic life that his Iñupiaq ancestors had lived for thousands of years. It was a life of cold and of constant effort, but Hensley's people also reaped the bounty that nature provided. In *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, Hensley offers us the rare chance to immerse ourselves in a firsthand account of growing up Native Alaskan. There have been books written about Alaska, but they've been written by Outsiders, settlers. Hensley's memoir of life on the tundra offers an entirely new perspective, and his stories are captivating, as is his account of his devotion to the Alaska Native land claims movement. As a young man, Hensley was sent by missionaries to the Lower Forty-eight so he could pursue an education. While studying there, he discovered that the land Native Alaskans had occupied and, to all intents and purposes, owned for millennia was being snatched away from them. Hensley decided to fight back. In 1971, after years of Hensley's tireless lobbying, the United States government set aside 44 million acres and nearly $1 billion for use by Alaska's native peoples. Unlike their relatives to the south, the Alaskan peoples would be able to take charge of their economic and political destiny. The landmark decision did not come overnight and was certainly not the making of any one person. But it was Hensley who gave voice to the cause and made it real. *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow* is not only the memoir of one man; it is also a fascinating testament to the resilience of the Alaskan *ilitqusiat*, the Alaskan spirit.

Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People Details

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From Reader Review Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People for online ebook

Steven Howes says

This is a very interesting book and,in my opinion, actually contains several stories even though it is billed as a personal memoir. The first is the author's personal story. He was born in 1941, the offspring of a Russian fur trader who didn't accept him and an alcoholic Inupiac Indian mother. He was rescued from his poor family situation by a great-uncle and raised by an adoptive mother in the Inupiac community of Kotzebue, Alaska. His early life was that of a typical Alaska native but it took place during the transition period between the "old ways" and encroachment of modern society. The author eventually obtained his high school education in Tennessee and then graduated from George Washington University.

The second story is about the author's involvement in settling Native Land Claims following Alaska's becoming a State. This is a similar story to what happened to Native Americans in the lower 48 decades earlier - the US buying Alaska from the Russians when it wasn't theirs to sell and then trying to hoodwink the natives out of their rightful land claims.

Another part of the story deals with the author's efforts to restore the Inuit/Inupiac people's pride in their culture, including the right to speak their own language, practice their own relgion, and maintain their close ties to the land.

While not what I would consider an exciting book, it certainly is worth reading if you have any interest at all in Alaska history and the life of Alaska natives.

Bob Schmitz says

If you are interested in how Alaskan Natives lived traditionally and how of all the Native American tribes they managed to retain a large amount of Alaskan land, (and mineral rights)and in the story of a remarkable man and his transformation from traditional to modern life this is the book for you.

The author was raised in Kotzebue Sound, twenty-nine miles north of the Arctic Circle, in the hunter/gatherer society of traditional Alaskan Inuits. Unacknowledged by his father, abandoned by his alcoholic mother and rescued by his mothers cousin he lived with his adopted family in makeshift houses on the beach in the summer and buried sod houses in the winter. In this semi-nomadic life he was often cold, hungry and constantly working, He was monetarily poor but rich with family and love particularly from his adopted mother.

Through the intervention of a missionary he ends up in a Baptist HS in Tennessee. Later from Alaska he applies to George Washington University and and then travels there before being accepted figuring "How can they not accept me when I have come all this way from Alaska?"

While there he realizes that the US government at the pushing of the oil lobby is about to take majority of Alaska from the Alaskan natives paying a small amount of money. He realized 2 things 1. Unlike other Native Americans the Inuit were never conquered in war and 2. By offering to pay anything the government is acknowledging that the land is owned by the Inuit. After tireless lobbying and organizing William Henley

and others get the US to aside 44 million acres and almost 1 billion dollars for use by Alaska’s native peoples. allowing the Native Alaskans to control their economic and political destiny.

It is a quick read and a remarkable story. Interesting anthropologically and politically.

Rock says

Willie mentions several times that storytelling is one of the great talents of his Inupiak nation, which makes it surprising that his story reads more like a time line than a dramatic narrative. Sure, it's in first person, and he throws in stories here or there, but they rarely add to the cohesiveness of the book, but rather seem to be there simply because he remembers them. Nonetheless, Mr. Hensley does a particularly good job describing his early childhood and the transitional way of life of his people at that time, which is a time period he returns to throughout the book to contrast with his people's contemporary lifestyles. Being that Alaska's natives are unique in the United States in being represented by regional corporations rather than tribal governments on reservations, I wish he would have taken more time describing how that was set up and administered. Presumably he thought that would have bored the average reader though. Ultimately I liked this book because of what happened in Willie's life, not because of how he wrote about it. So if you're interested in Alaska, Native Americans, or national politics in the 60s and 70s, pick up this book. Otherwise, leave it on the shelf.

Catherine says

This is a far more complex and subtle book than I gave it credit for when I began to read. *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow* starts out as an almost run-of-the-mill memoir (albeit about growing up Iñupiat in Alaska), yet ultimately it becomes a multi-layered examination of cultural protection and change. Hensley grew up practicing the subsistence patterns that had existed among his people, the Iñupiat, for thousands of years, but ultimately left Alaska to go to high school in Tennessee, to attend college in Washington, D.C., and to lobby for the rights of Native Alaskans to control the land they had never ceded to the federal government. As a state representative, lobbyist, and legislator among the Inuit's own four-nation federation, Hensley became adept at working the system, at recognizing the webs of Western political power and using them to protect Native land. Ultimately, however, he turned his attention to protecting Iñupiat language, culture, and spiritual practice, believing that land meant little if there was no culture to flourish upon it. (In one of the deftest moments of the book, his spelling of all his relatives' names shifts from English-Iñupiat to Iñupiat alone, just as he articulates his hope to see his culture revived. It's a beautiful touch.)

This would be a wonderful book to team with Vine Deloria's *The Trail of Broken Treaties*, or other memoirs / prescriptions for Native survival to come out of the 1960s. Hensley's path is different, yet fueled by many of the same desires articulated by Native activists in the lower 48. It's incredible to consider the way in which BIA boarding schools not only denied students knowledge of their *own* culture, but of a wider Native experience at the hands of the federal government - denying, in concrete terms, Hensley and his fellow generation of Native Alaskans an understanding that they were not the first to fight the battles they faced, nor alone in refusing to let their culture die.

A great book.

Tiba says

Actual rating: 3.5 stars
I feel like this book was two books combined into one short book. The first part was about Hensley's childhood and I loved that part. I would have given the book 4 stars at that point. It was so interesting seeing how different his childhood is from mine and what life in an Inupiaq village is like because I had no idea. The only shortcoming was the writing. Now don't get me wrong, there were definitely beautiful passages that captivated me, I wish there was more detail though. Hensley names places in Alaska and assumes that's enough for the reader to visualize the setting, however I barely know anything about Alaska. Other than the imagery, I just wish it was longer. I wanted more detail about his time spent in camp or in Kotzebue and more in depth descriptions of his feelings towards certain events in his life because I felt like this book suffered from the tell not show syndrome. Hensley would tell us he felt like committing suicide but that didn't impact me as much as it would've had he shown a particular moment that lead him to such a low point. Now all of this is about the first half of this book, the second half is an entirely different story. I found that the book really faltered when Hensley started to work on saving his people's traditional lands. Even though his fight should have filled me with rage and compassion and frustration and hope, it left me bored. There were so many name/corporation drops and business talk that I felt confused a lot of the times. Again maybe if there was more detail and the introduction of new people more was more spaced out I wouldn't have felt overwhelmed and bored. I don't want to end this review on a negative note because I did like this book. Even at its worse, it was engaging and it taught me a lot, so for that I would recommend this book. I think it's so important that it simply exists because we need more books about indigenous people written by indigenous people instead of white anthropologist or settlers.

Scot says

I enjoyed this memoir because of the topic: I have only really been able to spend time with Iñuits on a few occasions in my life, and those have been fairly fleeting encounters. I've never even been to Alaska. Therefore, learning about their culture and experience from an insider's perspective was appealing. The author was born in 1941, and was part of the last generation to spend much of their early years living out in nature in the Far North, eking out an existence in the traditional ways with only the most rudimentary of technological support procured from time spent in near where the *naluagmiut*, or white people, would gather.

Iggiagruk, also known as William L. Hensley, loved the old ways. His home base was around Kotzebue Sound, just north of the Arctic Circle. But he was a voracious reader, and was in the right place at the right time to take advantage of an opportunity to further his education by attending a Baptist boarding school in Tennessee during the days of segregation. Coming of age during the Kennedy administration, he would become a political advocate for his people, inspired in part by his participation in Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963, and he would help shape his people's future, as they negotiated for a land settlement from the government of the United States, and once arriving at an acceptable price, used the monies procured to set up corporations and infrastructures that would bring conveniences and other advancements to all the indigenous peoples scattered across the expanse of Alaska. But assimilation comes at a cost, and this is an issue also grappled with throughout the book that makes it a worthwhile read.

There is not great depth of thought here, and one sometimes gets the sense that some of the recollections of

struggles within the author’s personal life or his people’s collective life have been oversimplified or broadly generalized. Still, everyone benefits when they can see the world from a new perspective, and I would wager since not that many people have spent a lot of time reflecting on the twentieth century’s impact on Iñuit people, there are many worthwhile anecdotes here for general readers to pause and consider. I found the stories of the hunts particularly fascinating, and I was heartened by the movement to bring the Iñuit peoples of Greenland, Russia, Canada, and the United States closer together. A brief glossary and language guide as an appendix at the end offers anyone interested an introduction to the Iñupiaq language.

Alyssandra says

Lovely memoir of an enormous Alaska Native life in Alaska, written by one of the most integral politicians of the ANCSA legislation period.

Rick Skwiot says

A fascinating view inside Native Alaskan life above the Arctic circle and the author's journey in fighting for his people and their ancestral lands. His memoir not only spans Hensley's own 70+ years but, through his recounting the folkways, food and traditions of the Inupiaq, also the thousands of years that his hunter-gatherer people endured in their harsh environment.

Jan-Maat says

Well... I think I came across this thanks to a book review I saw in *The New York Times* which I saw thanks to the internet.

There are a couple of things I can say about this memoir by a person active in the Alaskan Inuit community written in 2009. It is written in three parts (upbringing and education, activism and struggle, finally 'oh my God, what the hell have we done' and upbeat resolution), it is rather like the dictionary of the Khazars in that language provides structure to the story of his life (and that in a way is part of his purpose, for this is a cunning and thoughtful little Arctic fox of a book)(view spoiler) and it is like Goethe's Italian Journey which I was reading concurrently, a mid-life crisis book. Reading this, a couple of times I felt moved to the verge of tears and so put the book aside for a bit, so if like me you are more of a soft boiled egg when it comes to considering marginalised communities slated to be made into omelettes you too might want to pair it with something else too.

His story beginning as these kinds of story often do with expansive extended families, childhoods that are hard, dirty but happyish, and alcoholic parents, he says his father was a Lithuanian, but he looked more Siberian to me in the reproduced photographs here, mother couldn't get out from under the booze and so he was brought up by his kin folk. Each incident in his recounted life is structured around an Inuit word (this is a great book if you are keen on languages) however the community by his time had already been strongly infected by missionaries and English (the Shiva of the linguistic universe). They loved going to the cinema and watching Westerns, they associated the Indians with the inland tribes who had been traditionally their enemies and so cheered for the white folks and misheard cavalry as Calvary due to missionary activity

(though I suppose since the arrival of the cavalry meant salvation for the land hungry settlers besieged in their blockhouse by the wicked Indians the misunderstanding wasn't so far off), but this illustrates the degree of ignorance they have about the history of north America as a whole . White people they called Naluagmiut which was a word used to describe good quality seal skins, which as ethnic names go is pretty good. Due to luck the narrator gets to go to a Baptist boarding school in Tennessee. Here he tells us he is very good due to his inherent native superiority at playing the white man at his own games, this we come to understand is symbolic of his entire life, including basketball, American football, and dating, in all all of which he describes his triumphs, showing us the message that 'we can beat the white man at his own game given a fair chance'. He spends a few terms at higher education institutes including in Washington and becomes aware of racial segregation in the South and the civil rights movement, and roughly of the histories of the various indigenous peoples in the USA.

Anyhow he returns to Alaska and gets involved with the transition to statehood, in-between working for a dollar or so in various odd jobs including a scheme to use a nuclear bomb to create an artificial harbour in order to show the soviets how clever the USA is- this doesn't work out, which for American legal reasons turns out to be the only and a golden opportunity to stake native land claims. The Nixon regime was sympathetic and due to the presence of oil, lots of money is suddenly sloshing about, for all his anti-suicide sentiments, given my own biases, The Limits to Growth and all that, that this Faustian pact was only going to end in cultural suicide. At one point he and some 'friends', all directors and CEOs of various things in Alaska, are travelling up river in a big Aluminium boat to hunt some endangered species and I felt as though I was reading the end of Animal Farm again - the faces of the pigs were indistinguishable from the faces of the quality seal skin people. Because you know, if you aim to play the quality seal skin people at their own games, using their own techniques and tactics, then at some point you tend to become indistinguishable from the quality seal skin people themselves. The boat gets stuck on a sandbar (this a memoir straight out of a storytelling tradition, many incidents serve simply to illustrate the bigger themes and are suspiciously too symbolic to be true but perhaps life is like that sometimes what Jung called synchronicity), and shortly after Hensley has a similar realisation and has a tearful breakdown (what is the point of having loads of juicy oil money to build schools if the children are going to be taught that they and their culture are a load of rubbish best forgot in favour of Ronald McDonald & co) and so he turns back to asking his people what it is that is good about themselves and their heritage and they build some summer camps for the children.

Of interest here is the construction implicitly though the use of language the point is made that the people are their language, if they loose their language they'll loose themselves, secondly the people are their place, the soil is full of the stone tools of their ancestors, they are what they are due to adapting to life in the Arctic, the dual Inuit/American identity of these people underlined by Hensley switching between using people's Inuit and English names. Also of interest is the move towards a pan-Inuit organisation from Alaska to Greenland. But really this is a book about the complex range of issues involved in being a minority culture that cannot escape integration into a wider and not particularly appreciative world. Not recommended for vegetarians or for people who disapprove of an owl's wing being used as a broom. And environmentalists get short shrift as Hensley declares his relationship to the natural world is more multi-dimensional than theirs. I do feel the lack of a broader perspective with more analysis of the bigger issues.

Brian says

Willie Hensley is one of the most prominent, tenacious, ambitious politicians in contemporary Alaska. I've heard him speak on several occasions and always thought his personality, especially as he makes himself known through his speaking voice, enigmatic. No wonder. Hensley lays it all out in this book. The height

and distance of his life's arc is remarkable. The story contains much information about the establishment of Alaska Native people in the new state's political discourse. But for people already versed in that social history, what stands out most is the portrait of a man grappling with almost unbearably heavy questions of duty, respect, cultural identity and personal destiny.

Jim says

Fifty Miles from Tomorrow refers to a timezone location on the west coast of Alaska, but, more importantly, tells the remarkable story of the Native People through the eyes of the mixed-blood native who led the quest to save land for all the natives of Alaska.

Hensley tells of his upbringing with relatives who lived off the land in northwest Alaska, of his education in Tennessee and Washington, D.C., and how a law course taken back home in Alaska opened his eyes to legal changes affecting all Native People in Alaska as it was nearing statehood and beyond.

First, Hensley had to find a way to encourage his people to recognize what was happening, and, secondly, unite to pursue action to secure a share of their lands and be compensated by the United States government. He succeeds, and then launches his own political career and advocacy for his people while still placating Alaska's ever-growing immigrant population (mostly of European descent) and American laws.

This is a history lesson on Alaska from within its natives, not the quest of outsiders to tame the land and people for themselves and their own version of government and economic pursuits. Readers get a close-up look of the annual life cycle of Native life and the values of a people who were always welcoming and accommodating to outsiders, often at their own expense. Hensley led an effort to make his people see what was happening at the moment and chart a course for their own tomorrow.

This book is a treasure because of Hensley's storytelling but also because a good friend who lives in Anchorage, and who is in step with the native population, gave us a copy, complete with a personal note from the author, welcoming us in anticipation of a visit we had been planning (but have yet to complete) to Alaska.

Israel Morrow says

Hensley has the gift of story-telling; but most importantly, he had the will to act when he saw Native land claims in jeopardy. Although he remains humble in the telling, Hensley can be called one of the most important Native political figures, having spear-headed the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement. Hensley's memoir also intimately explores Alaska Native history and culture. His insights were a reference for my book, Gods of the Flesh.

Sarah Pascarella says

An unexpected encapsulation of all of American history in one life, this memoir covers Hensley's Inupiat childhood north of the Arctic Circle, followed by his lower 48 education and unexpected career as a politician, businessman, community organizer, and cultural preservationist. At heart, it's a testament to

family, community, sustainability, and adaptation (both to nature and culture). Most of all, though, it's a call for respect and dignity, particularly for long-marginalized groups.

Dominika Baran says

Very interesting account of growing up Inutiktut in Alaska. It is a memoir and I learned a lot from it, and would definitely recommend it to anyone who is interested in Indigenous issues. However, the writing was mediocre.

Katherine says

A great read about a man’s life and how his life interacted with Alaska.
