

Family Matters

The tragic, shattering *Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

By Rachel Giese
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The Journals of Knud Rasmussen declares its intentions in its opening scene: a group of Inuit people in heavy parkas group together, fidget and adjust themselves, smile awkwardly and strike a variety of poses until — *click* — their image is captured in a sepia-toned picture. Since all of this is filmed from the photographer's perspective, the audience is placed in a voyeur's position. We are meant to watch these people as they go about their business — both the mundane and profound — never quite knowing them, but bearing witness to what will turn out to be a decisive moment in their history.

Drawn from events and stories collected in the notebooks of a real-life Danish explorer and ethnographer who traveled to the Canadian Arctic in the 1920s, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is the second feature from the [odd couple filmmaking duo](#) of Zacharias Kunuk (an Inuit) and Norman Cohn (a Jewish New Yorker). Their dazzling 2000 debut, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, based on an ancient Inuit legend, was a hit, nabbing the Caméra d'Or at Cannes. This follow-up is neither as easy nor entertaining a film. It lacks both the humour and the dynamic action of *Atanarjuat*, as well as a linear narrative. Yet the experience of watching *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is unexpectedly powerful — this is a film that works on the soul more than the brain. Patient viewing pays off. What appears at first to be aimless and occasionally stultifying storytelling, coalesces magnificently at the end into a tragedy of terrible proportions.

The plot begins in what appears to be the most remote spot in all the remoteness of the Arctic: a small community of igloos where the great shaman Avva (Pakak Innuksuk) lives with wife, Orulu (Neeve Irgaut Uttak), various in-laws and several grown children, including his daughter, Apak (Leah Angutimarik), who is rebellious, spiritually gifted and beautiful (so much so that one character points out that “no man is safe”). It's a harsh existence — starvation because of a poor hunt is an ongoing worry — but also an idyllic one.

Captured, like *Atanarjuat*, on digital video and then enriched in its transfer to film, cinematographer Cohn reveals a North of spectacular, endless, glittering white — and then contrasts it with the claustrophobic, cozy, lamp-lit murk within the igloos, where Avva and his kin are often shot in intimate close-ups. The family eats and jokes, sings and tells stories, but underneath is a growing strain. To her father's consternation, Apak ignores her second husband, a man to whom she was assigned to create a truce between feuding families. Instead she prefers to have dream-world sex with her murdered first husband. (These chastely shot scenes are at once creepy and palpably erotic.)

Into this bubbling drama arrive three Danish trader-adventurers: the titular [Rasmussen](#) (Jens Jørn Spottag), who was raised in Greenland by a Danish father and Inuit mother; Peter Freuchen (Kim Bodnia plays him wonderfully as a poignant Falstaff); and Therkel Mathiassen (Jakob Cedergrén). While Avva is skeptical of the white men — though amusingly, he does enthusiastically compliment their polar bear-skin pants — he offers them hospitality at his family's outpost. Rasmussen, fluent in Inuktitut, is keen to learn

their stories and history. He and his team are also, over time, compelled to share a little of their lives as well.

Avva and Orulu's life stories, which come straight from Rasmussen's journals, are told directly, statically to camera, an effect that stresses the film's anthropological roots. While a mysterious figure looks on in the background (it's later revealed that she is Avva's spirit guide), Avva recounts his cursed birth and the trials he overcame to become a shaman. Orulu's story of a deprived childhood followed by her rescue by her husband is even more affecting. Tears roll down her cheeks as she realizes that despite the hardships, she's had a happy life. Like most of the actors, Uttak is untrained. Her un-selfconscious delivery is mesmerizing.

The film's tone and structure reflect Kunuk and Cohn's backgrounds as experimental videomakers as much as they do the Inuit worldview — with its value of quiet observation and its frankness about sex, death and the spirit world. Which is to say that all of the above comes through in a collage of seemingly random set pieces and scenes that move, sometimes, at a glacial pace. What holds everything together is Kunuk and Cohn's authority as filmmakers and their confidence in their own vision. The simple, unconnected vignettes are the necessary, calm set-up for what is to come.

The "action," such as it is, picks up with the arrival of Apak's first sweetheart, Nuqallaq (the devilishly charismatic Natar Ungalaaq, who starred in *Atanarjuat*). He is from Avva's home community of Iglulik, which the family left after the other residents converted to Christianity. Nuqallaq engages in a little flirtatious banter with Apak before convincing the Danes that they should visit Iglulik. Avva is initially set against the idea, but hunger (bad weather has wrecked the family's hunt) and the Danes' urging eventually prevails. By the time the group reaches Iglulik, they have run out of food altogether — and the local leader won't share the hunt with those who don't join in his dirge-like songs about Jesus. As Apak, the extraordinary Angutimarik reveals her character's spiritual abilities — which surpass even those of Avva — in a powerful confrontation with her father. Apak has long known and feared what is to come. But it is Avva who must ultimately decide the Catch-22: does he submit himself and his family to a spiritual death or a physical one?

Too much shouldn't be disclosed about *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*'s stunning final scene. It's enough to say that trust in Cohn and Kunuk's understated and risky approach pays off. This film is a rare and shattering look at an indigenous community facing its own cultural extinction. And the emotional wallop of beholding that struggle reverberates for days that follow.

[The Journals of Knud Rasmussen](#) opens Sept. 29.

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