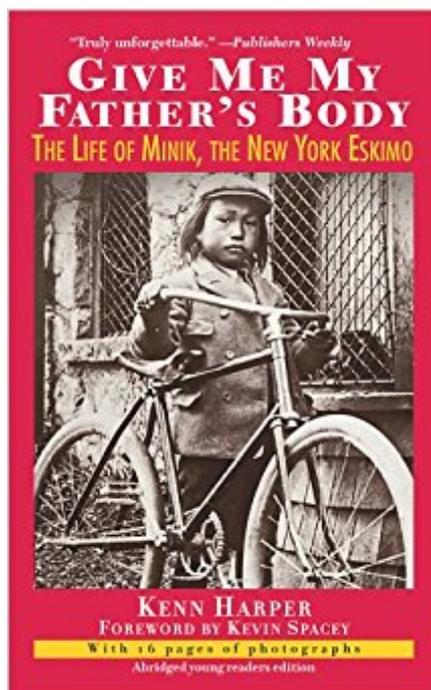


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# Give Me My Father's Body: The Life Of Minik, The New York Eskimo



## Synopsis

Everything -- my home, my eskimo culture -- all has been taken from me. Even my dead father's body could not be claimed for sacred burial. In 1907 the New York World carried a sensational full-page article. Next to an artist's sketch of a pleading boy, his arms outstretched toward the American Museum of Natural History, the headline blared, "Give Me My Father's Body." Ten years earlier the renowned polar explorer Robert Peary had sailed into New York harbor with six Eskimos as his "cargo." He deposited them with museum scientists as "living specimens" and then abandoned them. Four Eskimos died within a year. One returned to Greenland. Only Minik, a boy of six or seven, remained. During his twelve years in New York, Minik learned English, played sports, went to church, and acquired a taste for big-city life. But all that ended abruptly when he found his father's skeleton on display at the museum. Disillusioned with white society and desperate to return to his people, Minik finally sailed for Greenland in 1909. He succeeded in relearning his native language and the hunting skills he needed to survive, and even assisted a new generation of polar explorers, yet the rest of his life became a search to find a place where he truly belonged.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

At last returning to print, *Give Me My Father's Body* is the thought-provoking tale of Minik, a young Inuit boy brought to New York by Robert Peary around the turn of the 20th century. Told simply and interspersed with personal letters and newspaper clippings, the book examines Minik's life both as a

cross-cultural meeting place and a deeply personal search for a place to call "home." Photographs throughout of Minik give a glimpse into the incredible differences between the multiple worlds he inhabited, and how impossible it must have been to live in these worlds successfully. The title derives from one of Minik's more harrowing experiences--finding his father's bones displayed in a natural-history museum as a "curiosity"--and his attempts to retrieve the bones for a more respectful burial. Author Kenn Harper, while including many facts and articles about Arctic exploration, refrains from sharing opinions about the various explorers or their methods, choosing to share this story--and his years of research--plainly. From the death of Minik's birth father to the financial ruin of his American foster family, the events of Minik's childhood seem like one disaster after another, and his adulthood--the successful return to Greenland, followed by disappointment and a subsequent return to New York--is an unhappy struggle to find some kind of personal fulfillment. Questions of racial and cultural differences make an inescapable larger framework for Minik's life, and the emotions brought forward in answering those questions make reading this book a powerful experience. --Jill Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When six-year-old Minik was chosen as one of six Eskimos from Qaanaaq, Greenland, to accompany explorer Robert Peary to New York City in 1897, he expected a brief adventure. Instead, he became an orphan and an exile. Treated as scientific curiosities, Minik's father and three others quickly succumbed to pneumonia, leaving the boy alone after the only other survivor returned to Greenland. Adopted by a middle-class family, Minik enjoyed a few relatively happy years until the family suffered financial disgrace. Peary refused to help support the boy or finance his return to Greenland, and Minik languished in poverty for several years. The horrific climax to his ordeal came when Minik learned that his father's body had been put on display at the American Museum of Natural History. Though his efforts to claim the body launched a media frenzy, they ultimately failed. Minik eventually returned to Greenland, where he had to relearn his native language and customs. Feeling marginalized among his people, he returned to the U.S. in 1916 only to die here two years later. Harper, who has lived for more than 30 years in the Arctic and is fluent in the Canadian Eskimo language, tells Minik's story straightforwardly and with sympathy. Yet he adheres so scrupulously to Minik's letters and other written accounts that his narrative is sometimes dry. As a tale of scientific arrogance, however, the book is chilling; as a portrait of an exploited, charming, intelligent, needy, sometimes vengeful and culturally ambivalent individual, it is truly unforgettable. B&w photographs. (Apr.) BOMC selection; rights sold in England, France, Germany and Spain; film rights optioned by Kevin Spacey. Copyright 2000 Reed Business

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The story of Minik, a young Inuk who was taken from his home in Greenland by Peary along with several adult Inuit, is told with tremendous feeling and clarity by Nunavut author Kenn Harper. Minik, whose father was "studied" by anthropologists even as he was dying of tuberculosis, was left an orphan, and further subjected to the horrible deception of a sham burial conducted with a coffin filled with stones, while his father's body was displayed as a human specimen in the Museum of Natural History. Among those who 'studied' his father was Arthur Kroeber, the so-called "discoverer" of Ishi, and father of novelist Ursula K. LeGuin. Harper tells this tragic story with remarkable control, and Kevin Spacey contributes a brief but engaging foreword to the book, which he is working to make into a motion picture.

I might not have discovered this book if Kevin Spacey hadn't decided to buy the film rights and write a foreword to the new edition. This well-written, meticulously researched history has left me almost breathless. If you are at all disposed to history, biography, anthropology, or any other study of human nature and experience, do read this book. As Harper recounts the events of Minik's life, the age of Polar discovery draws nearer to the present day. I stopped at times to wonder how far we've come in understanding people different from ourselves, in respecting not just the "idea" of diversity, but diversity itself. As we embrace the fashions, foods, even religions of other cultures, I hope we are not losing sight of what lies beneath our differences: an undeniable similarity, a shared distinction that I can only describe as the fundamental nobility of humanity.

Excellent condotion

Excellent. I live in the New York town where Minik lived. I wish that I had known about this earlier in my life.

I recently finished reading Kenn Harper's book, "Give me My Father's Body", a book with a fascinating story that was not particularly told well. Perhaps it is Mr. Harper's rather basic writing style that allowed me to put this book down every now and again or the fact that he did not relate his subject's life in a terribly empathetic way. Minik, in the author's eyes, ranged from being an poor eskimo who was taken advantage of, to one being an astute manipulator. I was never quite certain which Minik he was talking about and in the end, I had no feelings for Minik one way or another. I

had a hard time believing that Minik's presence in America was as important as the author tried to relate. Curiously, the man who comes to life most in Mr. Harper's book is Admiral Robert Peary and the author adds to history's further debunking of Peary's claims that the admiral was the first to reach the North Pole. But to tie Minik as closely and as importantly to Peary as Mr. Harper tries to do is a bit of a stretch. The title, too, is somewhat misleading. "Give me my father's body", Minik's attempt to retrieve his father's remains from the Museum of Natural History, plays a fairly small role in the book. It is shown as a sidelight in the saga of Minik's life....a story I hope will be better told in Kevin Spacey's movie.

A crime perpetrated by an immoral, ethnocentric, Caucasian "Christian" society against Polar "Eskimos." This book was very difficult to read. The author, himself an Inuit, does an excellent job of telling this true tale in a straight-forward manner. It's just that the tale itself is horrifying. As Minik himself rhetorically posed to a New York news reporter: "How would Peary like to have his daughter carried off to the Arctic and abandoned to the charity of some kindly Eskimos? And what would the explorer do if he were walking through the museum and came across his own father staring at him blankly from a glass case?"

Things done in the name of science to the autochthonous people in this hemisphere have engendered support or cries of "genocide" from various factions. That theme, as well as that of a man caught between two worlds, and stories about those themes have been with us for centuries. This book grabbed my attention when I saw it on a book shelf yesterday and held my attention until I finished reading it in the early hours of this morning. What was new to me was the tale of Minik and the first transport of his Inuit people to New York in 1897. I found the details of their lives in Greenland to be a refreshing filling of my vacant knowledge of this group of people. This is a tale of (what I perceive to be) corruption on the part of hallowed institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History and the explorer Robert Peary. With only a modicum of knowledge of American history of the sciences I found the roles of Franz Boas, Peter Freuchen and other historical notables to be fascinating as they became important embroidery to the content of this story. For those of us who discuss (on our better days 80) the emotional issues surrounding the interaction between "scientists" and native peoples there are potentially positive responses from each camp of readers. Folks who see "scientific" study of native peoples to be fraught with potential or actual abuse and misuse will be able to say 'here we go again; science with no conscience'. Though this is not addressed in the book, those from the science side of the issue will be able to

point out how much science has changed. Perhaps, those of us between camps will be able to see both perspectives and, hopefully, be a part of dialogue which could find a way of bringing together people who have been separated for so long, and perhaps we shall be able to ensure such an incident does not happen again. While parallels between Minik and Ishi are perhaps inescapable, the life of Minik, brought to us by author Kenn Harper, was to me utterly believable and accessible. Harper's writing style I found to be clear and empathetic. His research appeared to be quite substantial if not exhaustive. For those who like a linear style of story, this should be an easy read. In the end it is a story of human cultural diversity and how diverse values play out in the lives of human beings. The author described those who may be viewed here as villains carefully including historical context. I found myself swept along by my own biases and felt very different attitudes about "science" than the author exhibited in the telling of the story. I appreciate an author who can engender such a response from me as a reader. The story is a unique specific of a familiar American generality. Minik was caught between two worlds, a victim of a society's unwillingness to question things done in the name of science. Ultimately, this is a very human story. I found the story at times heart warming, at others heart breaking, but always educational. john

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