Kabloona

Gontran De Poncins

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Kabloona is a true story of a journey into the North. This extraordinary classic has been variously acclaimed as one of the great books of adventure, travel, anthropology, and spiritual awakening. In the summer of 1938, the Frenchman Gontran de Poncins traveled beyond the "Barren Lands" north of the Arctic Circle to Kind William Island, an island of ten thousand square miles. The entire population of the island consisted of twenty-five Eskimos, their primitive lives untouched by the civilization of the white man. For fifteen months Gontran de Poncins lived among the Inuit people of the Arctic. He is at first appalled by their way of life: eating rotten raw fish, sleeping with each others' wives, ignoring schedules, and helping themselves to his possessions. But as de Poncins's odyssey continues, he is transformed from Kabloona, The White Man, an uncomprehending outsider, to someone who finds himself living, for a few short months, as Inuk: a man, preeminently.

Kabloona Details

Date	:	Published December 1st 1988 by Carroll & Graf Publishers (first published 1941)
ISBN	:	9780881841718
Author	:	Gontran De Poncins
Format	:	Paperback 339 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Travel, Adventure, History, Anthropology, Autobiography, Memoir

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From Reader Review Kabloona for online ebook

Marya says

Faaaaascinating! The reasons are threefold. First, the Inuit way of life observed and duly chronicled by the Vicomte Gontran De Poncins de Montainge. Gontran De Poncins himself, aka "Mike" A French aristocrat adventurer cum amateur anthropolgist and natural diarist. His experiences, observations (sometimes profound, often profoundly racist)and sketches come together as a vivid, candid, and insightful narrative. Finally the work itself as witness to the colonial context and inner workings of the colonial mind set. The language is at times repugnant to the modern reader, but a priceless illustration of the colonial psyche.

Donna says

Imagine a time in the arctic before wooden houses with heat, snow mobiles, telephones, television, internet..... only snow and ice as far as the eye can see. Need a house? Chop up snow and build one. Interior temp never higher than 32 degrees (F)since it would melt!

Every page of this "adventure" journal brings the details of an arctic, hunter community to life. The sounds, the smells(!), the repetition, the exhaustion of it all, and the contentment of the Inuit with their way of life. His details about the personalities and ways of living were shared as he participated. He expressed curiosity, revulsion, resignation, bewilderment, wonder and, eventually, respect for their simple and rhythmic life in a cold and unforgiving land. I experienced each of his days through his journaling. This book is one of a kind and a fascinating read.

Sylvester says

I've been looking for this kind of book for ages - a look at the traditional Inuit way of life. This is a fascinating record of one man's year spent in the Arctic. de Poncins is often insulting in the way he perceives his hosts, considering them to be Stone Age people who are less "evolved" than himself, while at the same time expressing appreciation for their adaptable nomadic lifestyle. By the end of the year he finds himself finally beginning to comprehend their sense of community which had offended the ego-centric individualism of his own culture. I loved the first-hand details of traveling with sled dogs, the seal hunts, the building of igloos, etc. My favorite part came near the end, where de Poncins speaks of sledge-traveling as "reading from the Book of Silence" (what a beautiful expression that is!) - how he and his Inuit friend have become so in tune that they are "reading" the sky and the landscape and the dogs for signs, and they stop when they need to adjust the sledge or the pack - all without speaking, knowing what each others' thoughts are because they are reading from the same book. Lovely. A wonderful look at a lifestyle that no longer exists. Highly recommended. (Also loved the mention of the St. Roch - a legendary ship here in Canada, on display at the Maritime Museum here in Vancouver, if I'm not mistaken.)http://www.vancouvermaritimemuseum.co...

Dave Gaston says

After I finished this fantastic audio book, I looked it up on Amazon to buy a used hard copy. I was little chagrined to discover the original printing date. Wow, this contemporary, quirky book -- that I just fell in love with -- was written 70 years ago. What a fun twist in time travel! Of course, three things aided the modern day allusion; first, it was read to me (on my ipod) by a modern audio book legend, Grover Gardner; Second, the setting is timeless, the remote wild's of the Canadian Arctic, and finally; I assumed the charming French-to-English translation was to blame for forcing just a hint of formality. Regardless, this classic adventure will stick to your ribs long after you have finished it. It is incredibly well written. It reads very fast for a book from the 40's. The story begins with Panches leaving Paris to live and study among the most remote tribal people on earth, the Canadian Arctic Inuits. For 15 months he moved among three remote Arctic tribes, living as they do, from day to day, absorbing their primitive, almost prehistoric, way of life. Their nomadic life was driven by hunger and thrashed about by the harsh laws of nature’s violent forces. In this barren sub zero land, the Inuit face the daily threat of starvation and exposure with great indifference. Past physically freezing to death, Panches biggest mental challenge turned out to be isolation. In addition, he had to reinvent his composure, severely modifying his natural inclinations with every Inuit interaction (several, life threatening). Panches describes his cunning effort in breaking through the cultural barrier; interpreting, in his words, “a truly primitive mind.” The book barks of some prejudice, but this was a man’s fair conclusion after keenly studying the unique Inuit mind and method (...in 1940). Light a fire, and read this adventure book during a cold snap. How cold? Cold enough to yank a 30 lb. fish out of the water and have it flash freeze before it skids across the ice. That’s cold baby!

Kevin Lawrence says

A five-star is probably generous (wish we had the ability to give books 1/2 stars, since this would get a 4 and 1/2 stars from me), but I so thoroughly enjoyed Monsieur de Poncins and his breezy way of evoking the Arctic region and its inhabitants. Probably some will cringe at the way he calls the Eskimos "savages" and "primitives" at times, but he always does so with a recognition that their environment necessitates a sharp distinction from that of the "refined" and "civilized" world M. de Poncins was so eager to take leave of. And there is no denying after reading this book that he has a profound respect for the men and women who eke out an existence for themselves in the indifferent climate of the Arctic circle. But ultimately, it is the self-reflective passages about cabin fever and adapting to a different culture/environment that give this book a haunting and uplifting quality for me (the passage about how he wanted to kill his very agreeable cabin-mate in the dead of winter is uproariously funny!) And then there are moments when he waxes poetic on the landscape and its relation to the people he meets that I think will linger with me for a long time:

"...I spent a good deal of time compiling an Eskimo-English dictionary. Primitive languages have a directness which long gone out of the subtle and metaphorical terminology of civilized speech. The Eskimo word for bishop, for example, is *ri-oo-mata,* "the man who thinks"; thier word for polar bear is *tara-i-tua-luk,* "he who is without shadow" (thoguht the polar bear is also called "the eternal vagabond"). There is a sort of poetry of the concrete in their speech that is very moving. Thus, *mi-kse,* the word for "reality" is literally translatable as "the thing turned towards you." When an object moans in the wind it is said to "grind its teeth." If two people have fallen out they are said to "drift away from one another," and if a man has not understood you, it is said that "you have missed him," *sil-la-ko-kto,* as if you words were a spear that had missed its mark. Our abstractions flatter the mind, but their concrete images go direct to the senses and tickle the palate, the sense of smell and of sight." (p. 155)

Pretty amazing stuff, so worthy of a 5-star rating!

Karson says

This was a pleasurable book about a french guy who lives with Eskimos for about a year and a half. He is a good story teller, and he doesn't inappropriately interject himself into the story too much. From stuff I have read in the past, the experience of living with more primitive people always makes the civilized visitor reflect on materialism and happiness. The "primitive" people always seem to have a higher quality of happiness, community, and a better ability to live in the moment. They also have less knowledge about other cultures, so they aren't plagued by the question "Is this the best way to live?" If you have only experienced one way of living than you don't worry about all the other options. The Inuit are also too busy with the 24/7 work of survival to philosophize about questions like that. They are a tight community of people struggling against a common foe: nature. Poncins touches on these ideas briefly in the last pages of the book. A lot of time in "the civilized world" is spent thinking about people we don't like. We make fun of them and distance ourselves from them. We push them out of OUR category and into the category of "the other". Poncins mentions the experience of sitting around with his acquaintances and feeling slightly annoyed by one or two of them. Before he knows it he is extremely annoyed by them, and totally caught up in these minor rubs we have with people of different personalities than us. The Inuit, he observed, had these spats but were so united towards one goal (basic survival) that these stupid social games were never played. Humanity doesn't have one goal like that in our wide and varied civilization. Too many options to choose from; too many divergent paths for us to realize what we have in common. A flash blizzard while stuck out in 40 below temperatures would pull us together for a moment. I think Poncins would say that, to our surprise, that would be a happy moment.

James says

Seldom have I encountered as extraordinary a book as Kabloona. It is a true example of sui generis writing and it is unlikely that anything quite like it will be written again. The author, Gontran de Poncins, spent a year traveling among the Eskimos in the Arctic. This book is the result, distilled from his diaries by Lewis Galantiere. Poncins took the perspective of the Eskimos, and as a result he, Kabloona (the White Man), took seriously what they did. The book is thus a unique combination of travelogue, memoir, and cultural study. It provides the reader with a unique picture into a society that in many ways had changed little since the stone age. It is a society that neither cultivates crops nor domesticates animals; living by the fruit of the sea for food and clothing. The natural beauty and its essential nature are also explored by Poncins who observed: "Strangest of all was the absence of color in this landscape. The world of the North, when it was not brown was grey. Snow, I discovered, is not white!" (p 56)

While the Eskimos called Poncins Kabloona, sometimes in derision, they proudly called themselves Inuit ("men, preeminently").
"I was to green to have any notion of Eskimo values. Every instinct in me prompted resistance, impelled me to throw these men out [of my igloo], --to do things which would have been stupid since they would have astonished my Eskimos fully as much as they might have angered them." (p 64)
Poncins eventually embraced their culture and thereby through sharing their lives and learning their culture he began to understand them. This is demonstrated over and over in the book as Poncins tells of his experiences with the Inuit against the background of the harsh nature of the Arctic.
"Everything about the Eskimo astonishes the white man, and everything about the white man is a subject of

bewilderment for the Eskimo. Our least gesture seems to him pure madness, and our most casual and insignificant act may have incalculable results for him."

I was most impressed by the description of nature and the land as in this moment from Chapter Four:

"It goes without saying that this tundra is barren of vegetation. No tree flourishes her, no bush is to be seen, the land is without pasture, without oases; neither the camel nor the wild ass could survive here where man is able to live. The Eskimo, preeminently a nomad and sea-hunter, is driven by the need to feed his family from point to point round an irregular circle, and it is the revolution of the seasons that directs his march." (p 77)

Much of what Poncins saw has disappeared over the decades since he visited the Eskimos. Their life, while still relatively unspoiled compared to most other societies is no longer one of a true Stone Age people. They live in shacks and seal oil is giving way to kerosene; even outboard motors may be seen. This remarkable book chronicles an earlier age a a people whose culture was an amazing anomaly in the twentieth century. The result is an exciting cultural and travel adventure told through a very personal narrative voice.

Mary Mccoy says

In 1939 this author left France and went to northern Canada to spend a year with the remote, mostly untouched, eskimos. His observations (and lack of judgement) on the eskimo culture are wonderful. One white guy said to him, "These eskimos is no good" and the author writes, what he really meant is that the eskimos are not good at being white people. His descriptions of day-to-day life are so real. Of course, I see many parallels to observing life in Tonga. In fact "Kabloona" is the eskimo word for "white man" (or "palangi as my Tongan connections will know). I love this book.

Nancy Kennedy says

As a young Frenchman living in Paris in the late 1930s, Gontran de Poncins slowly comes to realize that he has an urgent desire to live among the primitive Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic, even if he doesn't understand it himself. "I know only that some time before that spring day the word Eskimo had rung inside me and that the sound had begun to swell like the vibrations of a great bell," he writes.

With the assistance of the Catholic Church, which had missionaries in the far north, Mr. de Poncins makes his way, slowly and laboriously, to Canada, and then from Waterways to Goldfields to Coppermine to King William Land to Pelly Bay. As he travels farther north, he leaves more and more of civilization behind, until he lands in a settlement of igloos and Eskimos who have seen only one white man in their lives, the Catholic priest who lives in a ice-hole cut into the side of a hill. Here, life is considered normal and liveable in constant temperatures of fifty below zero. Every meal here consists of frozen raw fish, gnawed without utensils, and seal hides are the community's only currency.

Written as it was in 1941, this book itself is from another era altogether. I read slowly and with an open dictionary. My vocabulary was enriched on every page: susurrant, caracole, hebetude, somnambulism. Great words! The worlds he describes are even more remote and unknown to those of us in this generation, seventy-five years later.

Mr. de Poncins is both attracted and repelled by the worlds and people he encounters. His directness is refreshing, unencumbered as it is by any sort of political correctness. "The smell in the igloo was of seal and of savages hot and gulping," he writes of three Eskimos feasting on freshly killed seal. But he also surprised to find that he admires these men and women. Of an Eskimo who he describes as "infinitely repugnant of personality," he can also write of him as he builds an igloo, "This rude and mindless being became suddenly an artist as he stooped with a sober, concentrated gaze over the snow."

Mr. de Poncins' descriptive powers are great and the narrative is enlivened by his equally charming drawings and fascinating photographs. And, although he eventually has to return to civilization, his experiences leave him with a changed perspective, and a nostalgia for his time in the North. "These were the only moments of my life when I was describable not as a Frenchman, not as an individual product of heritage, place, environment, but as nothing other than, s

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Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Emir Never "discovered" this book. He sent me an sms one afternoon, copy in his hand inside a Booksale branch, asking me if I have read "Kabloona" by Gontran de Poncins. I replied no, and pointed out that both the title and name of the author sound strange. But there was wifi in the place I was at that time so I checked its rating here at goodreads and was surprised that a book with its author both of which I've never heard of before could have an average rating of 4.21 in 231 ratings and 40 reviews. So I texted back: "Buy!" The price: P25.00--roughly about half a dollar.

That was just the start of the series of amazing delights I got from this weird, completely discombobulating discovery. Emir Never, who takes eons to finish a book and sometimes even NEVER finishes them, read this in less than a week's time. Ready to turn it over to me we had lunch one friday afternoon and there he couldn't seem to concentrate on his katsu at Yabu blabbering about this book, written by a seemingly half-crazed French which began with a whimsical trip upon the urgings of maybe a photo he had seen or a conversation he had heard (he couldn't remember anymore), a trip where he almost died, writing/sketching/taking pictures of what he saw, heard, felt and learned. He did not just travel to a place and see men and women in their unique culture, He travelled back in time, back to the Stone Age, lived it, understood it, loved it, and gifted us with this book so we might also learn, and wonder, and look at ourselves in a completely different light.

A book conceived by fate, which I finished in record two days, the first book which made me whisper "thank you," feeling the burden of a tremendous debt of gratitude not to Emir Never but to its author and his literary collaborator, Messrs. Gontran de Poncins and Lewis Galantiere.

George says

Okay, I mentioned my top five books on the North when I wrote about Nunaga. Kabloona is one of those top five books. I even have the audio cd's of this book (which I will also try to recommend). If you want to know the details of a westerner (an outsider or "kabloona") living among the indigenous people, this is a wonderful place to start. Amazing. Remarkable. Extraordinary.

Jimmy says

Only rarely do I come upon a book that I cannot imagine anyone disliking. This is such a book.

In 1938, Gontran De Poncins, a Frenchman, decided to live with the Eskimos for more than a year. Afterwards, he wrote this amazing true story of his travels. The action starts almost from page one. You're plunged into story after story, each one more unbelievable than the last. You learn about basic Eskimo life, their strange customs and norms, their fear of commitment, seal hunting, igloo building, wild springtime orgies, casual murder and wife swapping. All woven into a continuous and exciting narrative of survival, exploration and self discovery. It is equal part anthropology, travel writing, memoir, comic entertainment, and spiritual meditation.

What's more, our narrator is an interesting guy, a very good writer, and slightly unreliable. You never get his backstory, but I found myself wondering more than once: Who is this guy and why is he here? Throughout the book he makes incredibly un-PC (and ultimately hilarious) remarks like "Properly speaking, the Eskimo does not think at all." He portrays the Eskimos as barbarians, disgusting, dimwitted, capable of incredible laziness, unfeeling, communist rat bastards, yet he turns around and praises them often for their physical grace, zen-like composure, and miraculous zeal for life in unbearably harsh conditions. He also portrays himself as impatient, silly, and hindered by Western possessions and need for security and definite answers. It soon becomes evident that the Eskimo is only a brute because he is an entirely other being than the white man, and indeed he makes an awful white man.

But as the book nears the end, Gontran himself slowly comes around to becoming an Inuit in spirit, a "man, pre-eminently". And the whole section where he writes about the calmness and joy at his heart when he finally gave in to the Eskimo way of life is incredibly moving. It makes me think of that Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience book I read last year, and how true some of what it said about happiness was. Here are a people who cannot think of much else other than the landscape and the next meal most of the time, because it takes all their energy to basically stay alive. And yet they seem like the happiest people on earth. They live a leisurely un-rushed communal life and take things in stride. There is no neurosis, everything is direct, uncomplicated. They live completely in the moment.

Of course, this is probably a bit romanticized, and some of the stories are probably embellishments of the truth (in fact, I would argue that it is precisely the flawed un-objective quality of this account that makes it so great). Still, something of the general spirit of these people comes through.

Also: if you liked the documentary Nanook of the North, you definitely will love this. A lot of the same stuff is covered here, except in more detail, and a lot of intriguing customs and ways of being are completely absent from the movie. If you haven't seen that movie, I highly recommend it as well.

Eric_W says

I read this book years ago and would never have found it except it was part of a terrific series of books republished by Time/Life. I got a whole bunch of excellent works that way, which I probably would not have discovered elsewhere. Originally written in 1941, it describes an Inuit village and family as authentically and as sympathetically as possible. Highly recommended to everyone.

Tom Johnson says

I first read Kabloona about 10 years ago - I gave it five stars. Since reading, "The Last Gentleman Adventurer: Coming of Age in the Arctic", I have reread and reassessed M. Poncins' book on his Arctic experience. Unlike Edward, who always kept his focus on the Inuit, Poncins seemed to be far more interested in himself. That may be an unfair take but pages 291-299, with the introduction of the lamentable HBC apprentice, L., seemed entirely too contrived to be real. The way Poncins compared himself to L. was clumsy and heavy-handed. Of a sudden Poncins declares himself to be Eskimo! That seemed a bridge too far. Still, for all that, Kabloona remains an interesting read. That there were major differences between Edward and Poncins did not matter as much as the huge difference between their respective books. Edward's book goes on my all-time favorites shelf, Poncins' does not. Another irritation of note. On page 114, I found it odd for Poncins to say, "...and he (the white trader at the Post) will have started in that obscure consciousness, (of the Inuit with whom he was dealing) which I hesitate to call a mind." Ouch. Those words seem a tad arrogant for a man who wouldn't last an hour in the extreme climate of the Arctic to say about a man who was more than capable to live in comfort in minus 50 degree weather, albeit at times precariously, for many a year.

Luke Marsden says

Gontran de Poncins arrives in King William Land, in the Canadian high arctic, as an anthropologist who appears bent on describing the peoples he encounters there in terms of the differences between them and those where he comes from. Even the title of the book - Kabloona ("White Man", in the language of the Netsilik) reflects this perspective. In the first part, he seems agitated and is quite hasty to resort to stereotype. Much of what he perceives as adverse differences between the Netsilik natives with whom he lives and himself, a Kabloona, would be attributable to any people living the way of life they lead: extremely hard, in one of the coldest and bleakest environments on Earth, in what a westerner would describe as extreme poverty, and with no formally structured education... Ironically, as a result of de Poncins' own preconceptions, the early sections of the book become as much an anthropological study of an early 20th century French anthropologist as they are of the Netsilik people of King William Land.

However, I get the impression that the book was written from the notebooks he kept while he was there, and he seems to write in a voice that is faithful to the mood he felt in the moment he describes. So, as it progresses, there is a tangible mellowing in his thoughts, and in the tone of his narration, as he becomes more accepted, and acquiesces to the ways of those he is among. This makes his earlier moments of uptightness and disdain for them appear as manifestations of his own shortcomings - the impatience, helplessness and suppressed desperation he felt upon first arriving in this place. The reading becomes far more relaxed at this point. That the Inuit succeed in the circumstances he describes is miraculous, and the enormous pride they feel in their way of life, and the extreme care and attention to detail with which they must live in order to survive, are conveyed well. When the physical surroundings are described they are hard to imagine, such is their other-worldliness: perpetual night, hunting seal by moonlight, haunting ice-scapes, weeks spent travelling by dog sled through vast emptiness, eating what is caught along the way, hastily erecting igloos in blizzards that it seems that nobody could survive... these are all part of normality.

He spends time with three separate groups of Inuit, amongst whom are scattered a handful of other westerners - trappers, missionaries and Hudson Bay traders. The tales he brings back are priceless, and are

what make this book so special. Barely mentioned, but notable, is the fact that it is the fashions of Paris, London and New York that are the sole reason for the presence of the Kabloona (other than the missionaries, but even they rely to some extent on the traders for survival) in these places. It is implied knowledge that the pelt of the White Fox is the de facto currency in those lands, even though the Inuit regard it as useless - it will eventually finds its way into the boutiques of the big cities. In that vein, there is surprisingly little treatment given to the wildlife in general, other than as a source of food or skins, although the sled dogs, by virtue of their forming an integral part of the arctic community, get some mention. In the end, it is the people that fascinate him, and it is their honesty, generosity and selfless acceptance of him that eventually win him over and help him to rid himself of his initial egoism.

Overall, Kabloona gives a phenomenal insight into a unique and vanished way of life, one whose essence should not be left to fade with time. This is a book that will stay on my shelves indefinitely.

Luke F. D. Marsden (author of Wondering, the Way is Made)
