

Raven's Witness: The Alaska Life of Richard K. Nelson

Hank Lentfer

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Slow down and contemplate how progress has come to trump stability through Hank Lentfer's evocative, absorbing, and relevant biography *Raven's Witness*—a timely reminder to replace “never enough” mantras with those that prioritize sustainability and that express gratitude and respect for the planet.

From an early age, Richard K. Nelson—or Nels, as he was affectionately known—was underwhelmed by his classroom education. He pursued his own curriculum outdoors, where he was perpetually awed by nature, the great teacher. Even so, he was oblivious to the fact that he would one day be involved in Alaskan land conservation.

At university, Nelson found his wheelhouse in cultural anthropology. As a post graduate, he undertook a project in the Arctic to learn about the Inupiaq people, ice, and hunting. He initially struggled to glean the answers to his myriad questions, but, on the advice of a friend to listen and observe, he changed his approach from that of questioning to listening. It was this approach that distinguished Nels from other cultural anthropologists going forward.

Lentfer's refined and evocative writing is enriched by excerpts from Nels's eloquent, revealing journal entries—Nels was an Alaska State Writer Laureate as well. Nels's adventures are absorbing. He's seen mushing with his pack of huskies, learning about the fading Koyukan Indian traditions of medicine men and spirit animals, and enjoying life at home, where he lived sustainably and built a writing shack in the wilds. There are poignant moments, too: Shungnak, a husky who spent her life tethered to a sled harness, discovers the freedom of loping on the beach for the first time.

Packed with relevant messages, Lentfer's biography is a timely reminder to heed the advice of students who have learned from the greatest teacher of all: nature.

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