



## Teaching in the Dark: A Memoir

**Genet Simone**

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*Directed by humility and humor, Teaching in the Dark covers a nascent educator's career evolution.*

Educator Genét Simone's memoir *Teaching in the Dark* is about the tumult of her first year of teaching in a remote Alaskan village.

In 1984 Simone was a recent college graduate. She applied on impulse for a high school teaching position in remote Shishmaref, Alaska. She had no teaching experience and only a few camping trips under her belt. Still, she got the job. The experience tested her physical endurance, professional knowledge, and mental resilience, from the moment she boarded the small, rickety plane headed to the island through to her acclimatization to the land. She struggled to tailor her curriculum to the needs of her Inuit students, knowing that only some of it applied; her students often spent their days fishing and hunting, and many weren't in search of a college degree. Despite her initial culture shock, Simone settled in well.

Directed by humility and humor, the book includes memories of deciphering the scrunches and eyebrow raises of the locals, traversing snowdrifts in below-freezing temperatures, and discovering how to use a "honey bucket"—a toilet with no plumbing. Radiant imagery captures the snow-covered landscape of Shishmaref as well. In the background are Simone's constant struggles to give her students the education they needed. In the process, she also learned about herself and what it meant to be an educator. Moments of light tension (as when Simone tried to figure out how to unlock her new home without a key) trade with instances of poignancy, as when Simone recalls younger children coming to say hello and begging for snacks and entertainment. Indeed, the book's recollections of Simone's budding relationships with her students are its most memorable portions.

Black-and-white photographs are scattered throughout the text—some more effective than others: the landscape images, and images of artifacts from Simone's travels, are evocative; there are also more personal shots. A few noticeable punctuation errors appear as well. But the subject of Native culture is approached with sensitivity: Simone acknowledges her role as part of a culture that historically oppressed Indigenous communities. Her interpersonal relationships with Native Alaskans are conveyed in dimensional terms as a result. And the book's conclusion is bittersweet, reflecting a career-altering decision and an uncertain future.

A humorous, tender memoir, *Teaching in the Dark* is about a year of teaching—and personal and professional growth—on an island in the Chukchi Sea.

ALLISON JANICKI (March 21, 2024)

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