

From The Explorer's Daughter

As a small child, Kari Herbert lived, with her family, among the Inughuit people (sometimes called Eskimos) in the harsh environment of the Arctic. In 2002 she revisited the area, staying near Thule, a remote settlement in the snowy wastes of north Greenland. In this passage she writes about her experience of watching a hunt for the narwhal, a toothed whale, and what she thought and felt about it.

Two hours after the last of the hunters had returned and eaten, narwhal were spotted again, this time very close. Within an hour even those of us on shore could with the naked eye see the plumes of spray from the narwhal catching the light in a spectral play of colour. Two large pods* of narwhal circled in the fjord*, often looking as if they were going to merge, but always slowly, methodically passing each other by. Scrambling back up to the lookout I looked across the glittering kingdom in front of me and took a sharp intake of breath. The hunters were dotted all around the fjord. The evening light was turning butter-gold, glinting off man and whale and catching the soft billows of smoke from a lone hunter's pipe. From where we sat at the lookout it looked as though the hunters were close enough to touch the narwhal with their bare hands and yet they never moved. Distances are always deceptive in the Arctic, and I fell to wondering if the narwhal existed at all or were instead mischievous tricks of the shifting light. ...

The narwhal rarely stray from High Arctic waters, escaping only to the slightly more temperate waters towards the Arctic Circle in the dead of winter, but never entering the warmer southern seas. In summer the hunters of Thule are fortunate to witness the annual return of the narwhal to the Inglefield Fjord, on the side of which we now sat.

The narwhal ... is an essential contributor to the survival of the hunters in the High Arctic. The mattak or blubber* of the whale is rich in necessary minerals and vitamins, and in a place where the climate prohibits the growth of vegetables or fruit, this rich source of vitamin C was the one reason that the Eskimos have never suffered from scurvy*. ... For centuries the blubber of the whales was also the only source of light and heat, and the dark rich meat is still a valuable part of the diet for both man and dogs (a single narwhal can feed a team of dogs for an entire month). Its single ivory tusk, which can grow up to six feet in length, was used for harpoon tips and handles for other hunting implements (although the ivory was found to be brittle and not hugely satisfactory as a weapon), for carving protective tupilaks*, and even as a central beam for their small ancient dwellings. Strangely, the tusk seems to have little use for the narwhal itself; they do not use the tusk to break through ice as a breathing hole, nor will they use it to catch or attack prey, but rather the primary use seems to be to disturb the top of the sea bed in order to catch Arctic halibut for which they have a particular predilection*. Often the ends of their tusks are worn down or even broken from such usage.

Comment [JP1]: Waiting, patience, foregrounding

Comment [JP2]: Commas → short phrases → excitement

Comment [JP3]: Definitive, serious

Comment [JP4]: Shimmering beauty

Comment [JP5]: Magical, otherworldly, doesn't fit into this world, Arctic is unique

Comment [JP6]: Beautiful, amazement, tranquil- peaceful

Comment [JP7]: Intelligent creatures- move gracefully

Comment [JP8]: Contrast to 'always slowly', beauty of narwhal and their patience

Comment [JP9]: Magical, fantasy

Comment [JP10]: Excitement

Comment [JP11]: Men are small, insignificant but appear as brave, heroic

Comment [JP12]: Warm, light- despite Arctic being a cold place, calming- evokes sense of beauty

Comment [JP13]: Close dependency between man & nature, unity- struggle for survival

Comment [JP14]: s- sibilance → soft, detailed description, evokes beauty, feels peaceful, romantic, contrasts to isolation

Comment [JP15]: Unknown, mysterious, immeasurable, unlike the real world
Distance- real world, concrete measurement, different from Arctic
Uncertainty may reflect the later moral dilemma

Comment [JP16]: Blurring of reality, unsure of what is real- magic

Comment [JP17]: Long paragraph, slow pace → waiting, building tension

Comment [JP18]: Informative, foreground the subject, suggesting the factual nature of this paragraph

Comment [JP19]: Technical terminology - again informative

Comment [JP20]: Making it clear that this moment is an important one

Comment [JP21]: Personal, refocuses back to story

Comment [JP22]: General info, contrasts to previous

Comment [JP23]: Dependency on narwhal to survive

Comment [JP24]: Nothing can grow here, difficulty of life

Comment [JP25]: One narwhal can do so much

Comment [JP26]: The struggle to find food, how difficult, we may not understand

Comment [JP27]: Vital to life, support for life → everything revolves around survival, need narwhal for this

Comment [JP28]: Lists uses, people resourceful with just one whale - everything for basic survival- nothing frivolous

The women clustered on the knoll of the lookout, binoculars pointing in every direction, each woman focusing on her husband or family member, occasionally spinning round at a small gasp or jump as one of the women saw a hunter near a narwhal. ... Each wife knew her husband instinctively and watched their progress intently; it was crucial to her that her husband catch a narwhal — it was part of their staple diet, and some of the mattak and meat could be sold to other hunters who hadn't been so lucky, bringing in some much-needed extra income. Every hunter was on the water. It was like watching a vast, waterborne game with the hunters spread like a net around the sound.

Comment [JP29]: Intensity, focus on the men – contributes to building tension

Comment [JP30]: How dependent everyone is on the narwhal again adds to the tension

Comment [JP31]: Once again tension is reaffirmed – the implication is that if one of the hunters is unsuccessful, their life will become very hard

Comment [JP32]: Exciting to watch, nervous - tense

Comment [JP33]: Waiting, anticipation for anything to happen, tension increases – the image of entrapment also evokes sympathy for the narwhal

The narwhal ... are intelligent creatures, their senses are keen and they talk to one another under the water. Their hearing is particularly developed and they can hear the sound of a paddling kayak from a great distance. That ... was why the hunters had to sit so very still in the water.

Comment [JP34]: Again an informative paragraph, like the second one, this breaks tension to allow for a more effective build up towards the climax later on.

Comment [JP35]: Narwhal are very smart, like humans – again creating sympathy. Hence the moral dilemma – they are necessary to survival but beautiful creatures in themselves that should be preserved. The intelligence of the narwhal also intensifies the difficulty of the hunter's job and the tension as we wait to find out about the catch

One hunter was almost on top of a pair of narwhal, and they were huge. He gently picked up his harpoon and aimed — in that split second my heart leapt for both hunter and narwhal. I urged the man on in my head; he was so close, and so brave to attempt what he was about to do — he was miles from land in a flimsy kayak, and could easily be capsized and drowned. The hunter had no rifle, only one harpoon with two heads and one bladder. It was a foolhardy exercise and one that could only inspire respect. And yet at the same time my heart also urged the narwhal to dive, to leave, to survive.

Comment [JP36]: Outnumbered in comparison to narwhal, as well as much smaller

Comment [JP37]: Pauses, punctuate sentence, increase tension

Comment [JP38]: Poorly equipped, not easy, harsh conditions – tension and sympathy for the hunters

Comment [JP39]: Emphasized with 'only'. Not easy to do at all, and should not be looked down upon

This dilemma stayed with me the whole time that I was in Greenland. I understand the harshness of life in the Arctic and the needs of the hunters and their families to hunt and live on animals and sea mammals that we demand to be protected because of their beauty. And I know that one cannot afford to be sentimental in the Arctic. 'How can you possibly eat seal?' I have been asked over and over again. True, the images that bombarded us several years ago of men battering seals for their fur hasn't helped the issue of polar hunting, but the Inughuit do not kill seals using this method, nor do they kill for sport. They use every part of the animals they kill, and most of the food in Thule is still brought in by the hunter-gatherers and fishermen. Imported goods can only ever account for part of the food supply; there is still only one annual supply ship that makes it through the ice to Qaanaaq, and the small twice-weekly plane from West Greenland can only carry a certain amount of goods. Hunting is still an absolute necessity in Thule.

Comment [JP40]: Triad, emphasizes desperate desire

Comment [JP41]: Reflection, not about action now, the overall point that she is trying to understand the two different feelings evoked by this scene: do we support the hunters in their valiant attempt to catch food or do we want the beautiful, graceful, intelligent whales to escape? Long paragraph, how complicated the problem is as no one side is more right than the other.

Comment [JP42]: Understands the logic – but the phrase implies that while she grasps the reasons the Inughuit have for hunting the whales, she is not fully convinced (at perhaps a more basic / emotional level)

Comment [JP43]: Being selfish in the Arctic is necessary for survival, is a matter of life and death

Comment [JP44]: Both sides of the argument

Comment [JP45]: Taken very seriously, not about having fun when hunting

Comment [JP46]: Nothing is wasted, everything used to survive

Comment [JP47]: Have to hunt as there are no other real choices

Comment [JP48]: Clearly states why it is needed. Short, blunt sentence. Ends with this. However she never agrees or makes a choice on the matter, only states the arguments. A question that we have to ask ourselves as well, if another life is more important than our own. To emphasise this we are prevented from finding out whether the hunter actually succeeded in catching a narwhal or not

Kari Herbert

*Pods**: small groups of whales

*fjord**: a long, narrow inlet of the sea with steep sides

*mattak or blubber**: the fatty skin of the whale

*scurvy**: a painful, weakening disease caused by lack of vitamin C

*tupilaks**: figures with magical powers, charms

*predilection**: liking

Organising Principles:

Genre: Autobiography: informing, entertaining, sharing cultures (similar to travel writing)

Audience: Adult

Purpose:

- Evoking sense of beauty- Arctic, Narwhal
- Sympathy for narwhal
- Necessity for narwhal hunting
- Moral dilemma- hunting vs. preservation