



*Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*, by Rudy Wiebe. Landmark Edition. NeWest Press: Edmonton, 2003. 149 pages. ISBN 1-896300-67-7. soft cover CAN \$18.95.

Reviewed by Taina Maki Chahal.

The third reincarnation of a series of lectures Rudy Wiebe delivered at Trinity College in 1987, the aptly named *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*, is the first title in NeWest's Landmark Edition Series. The NeWest series aspires, as Robert Kroetsch notes in the Afterword, "to bring back into print, keep in print, important books by western Canadian writers, books that have become a part of the Canadian canon." Canons, however, can be inherently problematic for their exclusions and role in constructing histories and myths of nationhood, and *Playing Dead* appears inescapably part of the white masculinist colonial mapping of "the Arctic" (despite Wiebe's self-reflexivity and sincere respect for the land and its people). It is nonetheless an important addition for anyone interested in developing a nuanced understanding of the multiple stories that construct the North. Wiebe is an outstanding storyteller, combining myth, memories, and excerpts from early explorers' logbooks, photographs, poetry and prose, but the question of whose stories get told and by whom, and how they are taken up (or not!), is a critical consideration. The story of "Green Stockings," the daughter of Keskarrah, is one such example. This renamed Yellowknife woman is as mute in Wiebe's telling of her story as in the logbooks of the early Arctic adventurers whom he cites.

To this new expanded collection of writings that he originally, and more romantically, called "The Arctic: Landscape of the Spirit," Wiebe adds: a Prelude; a Coda; an Afterword; illustrations; the altered map; and, new bibliographic references that reflect, in his words, "various Arctic changes in the past...years." Whether it is "the Arctic" that changes or it is our/non-Inuit ideas of what we *imagine* as the Arctic change is something Wiebe himself takes up in the book. *Playing Dead* is a re-telling of the stories of the white male interlopers of the Arctic (such as Samuel Hearne, John Richardson, Vilhjalmar Stefansson and Robert Hood, to name just a few) through the inclusion of fragments of Inuit stories and songs such as those of Felix Nuyviak, Anthony Apakark Thrasher, Peter Pitseolak and Higilak, and through Wiebe's experiences and travels in the

Arctic. A reflexive re-writing, however, does not automatically translate into an unproblematic rendering. Wiebe's Arctic, both past and present, is primarily narrated through the words of men - white and Inuit - focusing on re-imagining colonial accounts. Despite his attempts to bring in the shaman Uvavnuq and Fanny Pannigabluk, Wiebe's marginal inclusion of Inuit women results in a particular racialized and gendered fiction of the Arctic.

The choice of Kroetsch, a canonical writer, to comment on Wiebe's book, is short-sighted, as the Arctic that *Playing Dead* narrates remains firmly in familiar and untroubled hands. A much better choice would have been the insights of an Inuit writer such as Rachel Attituk Qitsualik, who speaks of the "breathing archives" found in the stories of contemporary Inuit people. Well versed in the stories of her father, grandfather and grandmother who worked with the likes of Knud Rasmussen and Joseph Bernier, Attituk Qitsualik could have taken Wiebe's book a step further, beyond the map, beyond the Anglo place names littered across "the Arctic" and towards Nuna and Sila - Inuit concepts of the land and the air/environment which do not translate across language. Unlike the landscape that the English descriptor evokes, Nuna and Sila are philosophical ideas of material/cosmological place that are not separate from each other nor outside of the people/the inhabitants. (please see "Shadow of Death: Part Two" and "Sila" at <http://www.nunatsiaq.com/archives/nunavut000331/nunani.html> and <http://www.nunatsiaq.com/archives/nunavut000731/nunani.html>).

As the upside-down map (to those of us schooled in the Western idea of the world) in Wiebe's book infers, when we pivot from the center and shift our perspective, we see from a different standpoint, from behind the 'eyes' of the waters, the land, and the indigenous peoples of the Arctic/Nuna/Sila. Our sense of the world as defined through taken-for-granted notions can change dramatically. Despite continuing problems of voice and representation, *Playing Dead* still has much to offer. Ultimately, Wiebe's introduction to ideas of the linear and areal concepts embedded linguistically in Inuit geography/philosophy hints to the non-Inuit reader of the possibilities of contemplating a truer picture of that unimaginable, awesome "Arctic."