

Lived Realities Inhabit Northern Reflections

For Inhabit Media, the passion for telling stories of the North comes straight from the heart and from those who lived them.

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE



Danny Christopher, Louise Flaherty and Neil Christopher of Inhabit Media

Inhabit Media has become the ultimate creation story for founders Neil Christopher, his partner Louise Flaherty, and brother Danny Christopher. Based in Iqaluit, Nunavut on Baffin Island, the company became the first Inuit-owned, independent publishing company in the Canadian Arctic.

With that distinction, their drive to preserve the North's language, legends and oral history far exceeds any commercial venture. The mission to share and honour the lived realities of the Nunavummiut community, elders and storytellers has become a personal crusade.

Recently, *The Globe and Mail* listed Inhabit Media titles, *The Owl and Two Rabbits*, *The Pencil* and *Those Who Dwell Below*, amongst six new Indigenous books for younger readers.

Neil Christopher reveals what it's really like to work and survive in the challenging terrain of Northern publishing.

To see it is to know it

Trained as professional educators, the team combined their creative talents to form Inhabit Media in 2006 and began publishing books about the Inuit way of life for children, young adults and adults. The company also produces films and spawned Inhabit Education.

Nearly two decades ago, Neil and Louise trained candidates to teach in an Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun and English setting within the Nunavut education system. After witnessing the difficulties faced by students and teachers who had few resources, they decided to make children's books in the Inuktitut language that reflected the lives of their students.

"We realized that Nunavut children didn't have that," recalls Neil who is also an author and filmmaker. "They were always reading about someone else's culture. It looked like

that was the special place to be, not their home or the things they did with their families.”

For Neil, Louise and Danny, it was imperative that the lives of Nunavummiut children were respected and protected in books and that Inuit children would be inspired by their own stories.

“That’s what inspired Inhabit Media to come into being. Educators sitting down and thinking, ‘How do we serve our community and create something that is reflective of everyone, the culture, the lifestyle, the sensibilities and the values of the place that we live?’”

A monster story brings it home

As a child, Neil loved a good monster story like *mahaha*. The character was initially found in a limited number of printed books by Elder, teacher and translator, the late Mark Kalluak who eventually became an author and illustrator with Inhabit Media. The company has since published several books on the character, transforming the once obscure *mahaha*, into a well-known cultural icon.

“Mythic characters are almost becoming part of popular culture in the North, which is wonderful to see. I can see how important it is to locally create books and how influential they are. Now you can refer to the book and everyone knows it. It’s part of everyone’s childhood.”

Through the release of the *mahaha* book, Neil feels he was targeting the boy in him who didn’t want to read.

“We had teachers telling us that little boys who don’t like to listen at story time were, all of a sudden, asking for that book. One teacher had a rule that they could only read that book three times in a week. It was hilarious.”

He adds, “They were little kids who were hungry for stories about where they’re from. We really saw that.”

Can’t stop the contagion

The team from Inhabit Media often see people carrying their books around town. They even run into starring characters in unexpected places, such as the local kids’ cooking class where Danny was doing a cookbook photo shoot. He came across several students who had inspired children’s books authored by their parents and were featured in the stories.

“These stories are tied to real people and it comes from such an authentic place. That’s what’s really exciting to me. It’s so good for role modelling in our community and it seems to be almost contagious.”

According to Neil, many local kids assume that everyone’s in a book now.

“It’s funny when I see Leah from *Leah’s Mustache Party*, it’s kind of like, ‘Yeah, that’s me in the book.’ It makes the book real and normalizes it. It takes away the distance between publishing. They are part of that literary world and anyone can be part of it.”

Authentic or bust

Although the North’s authenticity still exists amongst southern influences, Neil believes that Iqaluit and the North are in a time of transformation.

“We decide for ourselves what is a Northern story. That’s the most important thing.”

In turn, Inhabit Media often ventures where publishers from the South dare not. He refers to a story of a hunter that must blind a polar bear in order to survive.

“We’re a hunting culture in the North. *The Giant Bear* by Jose Angutinngurniq is a traditional story about someone being resourceful and trying to survive against a far more powerful being.”

While he feels no one in Nunavut would object, he acknowledges that many, outside of the Arctic community, would deem such stories as inappropriate for children.

“Then we’ll say, fine don’t buy it. But we’re doing things with our sensibilities. Sure, it’s not appropriate for you and that’s fine.”

The company also publish books with wider commercial opportunities. Neil is proud of their work and wishes that all Canadian communities could have a publishing company dedicated to representing their authentic voice.

“To have all of that contributing to the diverse voice of Canadian literature, we’re all the richer for it.”

Neil is encouraged by the community support for their publications, including the Nunavut Department of Education which is developing novel studies on some of their books.

Keeping it real

Currently, Inhabit Media has the capacity to create stories from Nunavut. While they are exploring expansion into a Yellowknife office, they are focussed on Nunavut stories that can be verified firsthand. As Northern publishers, they feel this is vital.

In addition to oral histories and centuries-old legends, Neil feels the authentic Inuit voice can be found in modern tales such as *Leah’s Mustache Party* about a little girl who wanted to have a mustache party for her birthday.

“If you look at that book, you might think that’s not an Inuit book, but it is. It’s written by an Inuit parent and her daughter. It’s a contemporary story that’s an authentic Northern story because it happened to a little girl in Iqaluit.”

Working so hard to get it right

Neil’s team agonizes over the details. For a sensitive topic such as residential schooling, they require that the author has a personal connection, a personal investment and the authority and sensitivity that comes with lived experience.

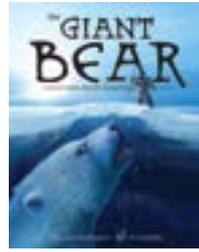
“I feel the storytellers that remember the old stories are the people who should be recognized for recalling and publishing their original stories, not someone who heard it once and wants to write it down.”

Neil remembers asking Mark Kalluak how he knows these stories so well.

“He said, ‘You have to realize my mother told me this story almost every day of my life growing up. I’ve heard it 10,000 times. Every word of this story is burned into my brain.’”

As a publisher, Neil still recalls the advice elders have given over the years.

“Most of them are not with us anymore, but I hear their voices in my head when working on a project. We feel accountable to them, to their families, to everyone.”



Strong connections through stories

It seems storytelling has magnetic powers to bring generations together. Neil remembers reluctant students from a past Traditional Stories course. According to them, their family didn't have traditional stories. As teacher Neil suspected, they were wrong.

"As soon as they started asking their elders, they just started flooding them with stories. They had been holding them in for so long. That kind of intergenerational conversation is so exciting."

Now, Neil points to award-winning singer-songwriter and Inhabit Media author, Susan Aglukark. Her book made CBC Books' List of Top 25 Canadian YA and Children's Literature of 2018. *Una Huna?: What is This?* depicts a girl and the impact felt by her Northern community after encountering a trading ship from the South. According to Neil, Susan told him that she connected with her own mother in a different way while writing the book and learning about what her life must have been like at contact between North and South.

"Unfortunately, after that generation is gone, we won't remember the pre-contact time or the early time in communities. We're working hard to record them so that those lived experiences will not be forgotten. We are also recording our community's history and in a real way, becoming a part of popular culture in Nunavut."

Neil also feels a strong cultural identity can broaden the community and aid with issues such as high suicide rates that can be associated with the dislocation of culture.

"It's important that [each of us] realize who we are and be proud of who we are."

Discovering stories, searching for pictures

In the beginning it was tough to coax people into sharing their story. Now, they are reaching out and sending in manuscripts.

However, Neil thinks book illustrators are harder to find. In addition to using international illustrators, he credits Babah Kalluk, Germaine Arnaktauyok, Celina Kalluk and Megan Kyak-Monteith as successful Nunavut artists who practice the demanding discipline.

"People think that the North is full of artists, and it is, but it's not full of illustrators. Illustrating is a very different animal. We made a decision early on that we were not going to be limited to publish one book a year because that's all we could get illustrated in Nunavut at the beginning. So, we reached out to the whole world. However, we art direct the books in Nunavut to make sure that the cultural details are accurate."

Publishing in traditional language

A big part of Inhabit Media's publishing initiative is Inuktitut literacy. Their goal is to have every book available in Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun followed by English. Some are also available in French.

"There aren't a lot of books in the world that are in Inuktitut. Elders and proficient speakers often say that the language spoken by young speakers is not as strong. So, we need to have books that model strong, rich language, rich vocabulary and proper grammar."

Inhabit Education

Created initially by Inhabit Media, Inhabit Education works separately to provide educators and families with educational resources that feature Northern perspectives, ways of life and imagery. In addition to counting skills and social emotional learning, their books, such as the Nunavummi reading series, support children at various reading levels.

"We saw there was a real need. If not, all the resources would be coming from the South."

Challenging Responsibilities

Aside from balancing work, family and getting enough sleep, Neil feels that getting the books to the people who want to read them is a big challenge. In a publishing world known for its small profit margins, he is encouraged to see a resurgence of small bookstores who carefully curate their collections.

"We've been going into foreign rights sales because that's the responsibility as a publisher. We're responsible to those authors, to protect their work and to help them derive an income from it. As we expand, our responsibility increases because we are trying to help an industry in the North to take off."

Lucky Nunavut, lucky everyone

"I think Nunavut is lucky to have an independent publisher working on its behalf. I feel so fortunate, so lucky to work with the community and authors."

Neil values opportunities such as the Association of Canadian Publishers, for small publishers to get together to share stories.

"It's great when we can all sit down, realize that we're all on the same team and figure this thing out together." 🙌

Maryllynn Miller Oke is a freelance writer. With experience in broadcast and public relations, she covers a wide range of today's intriguing topics.