

Unalakleet writer revives story of 'little people' in children's book

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"Irigak" is a book by Amber Cunningham of Unalakleet that tells the story of a young boy named Keane who is taken away by little people, or Irigak, and the adventure he faces trying to escape.

Many people who grew up in rural Alaska will recall stories of little people — strange and strong people with mysterious special powers. Little people have long been a part of Alaska Native stories, as parents and elders warned children that little people can steal away children into the wilderness.

Cunningham said she grew up hearing these stories. She moved from Anchorage to Unalakleet when she was 13 and recalls being familiar with the little people of lore, but never feeling a real connection to the story because she never heard stories of people from her village being abducted by them.

With "Irigak," she wanted to write a story about little people that would "be special for Unalakleet residents." She said, "I wanted to pass on our oral tradition and Alaska culture."

Cunningham's story is a rare combination of funny and cautionary. Keane, the young boy, asks himself after being abducted, "What could a

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midget elder do to me?"

The answer, perhaps, is quite a lot. The little people in the story take several children away from their village and families for years at a time. Cunningham clearly knows how children speak and think, and writes with her readers in mind.

Cunningham based the characters in the story on her children. The main character, Keane, is named for her oldest son. She said, "He is very helpful in taking care of his younger sister." But, she continued, "He is also very curious, so it would be fitting that he be the main character who follows the Irigak."

In the story, Keane has to cleverly maneuver his way around the Irigak in order to escape and get home. Along the way, Cunningham imparts some lessons about the importance of friends and family. She said she could not have written the book without the support of her friends — whom she calls "lifers" — and family.

Cunningham also hopes children will take some practical lessons away from the story.

"The moral of the story is using safety precautions while out in the country," she said. "Children should always stay close to adults and other people when berry-picking or hunting."

"Irigak" ends without complete resolution. Much of the mystery of the Irigak remains, ripe for more stories for years to come.

For her part, Cunningham hopes that her story will open the minds of young and old readers, and that she can add to a rich tradition of storytelling.

"Irigak" is available on Amazon. For more on author Amber Cunningham, visit ambercunningham.blogspot.com.

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