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My Name Is Not Easy

By Debby Dahl Edwardson

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My name is not easy. My name is hard like ocean ice grinding the shore...Luke knows his Iñupiaq name is full of sounds white people can't say. So he leaves it behind when he and his brothers are sent to boarding school hundreds of miles away from their Arctic village. At Sacred Heart School, students—Eskimo, Indian, White—line up on different sides of the cafeteria like there's some kind of war going on. Here, speaking Iñupiaq—or any native language—is forbidden. And Father Mullen, whose fury is like a force of nature, is ready to slap down those who disobey. Luke struggles to survive at Sacred Heart. But he's not the only one. There's smart-aleck Amiq, a daring leader—if he doesn't self-destruct; Chickie, blond and freckled, a different kind of outsider; and small, quiet Junior, noticing everything and writing it all down. They each have their own story to tell. But once their separate stories come together, things at Sacred Heart School—and the wider world—will never be the same.

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Editorial Review

Review

Told by five different narrators covering the time period 1960-65, this is essentially Luke's story, whose native and, as the title indicates, difficult-to-pronounce name is not revealed until toward the end. Forbidden to use their language, fed unfamiliar food and under the thumb of priests and nuns, some strict and some kind but whose religion is unfamiliar, Luke's homesickness is visceral. The good wishes and intentions of other children, their teachers and their parents all fail to offer comfort or to soften the hardships endured. Details of the outside world and the concerns of the day are woven in to the narrative, often highlighting how astonishingly oblivious the world is to the reality of life in Alaska. The rivalry between Indian and Eskimo is made equally vivid, along with the stereotypes and bias that both sides believe about the other. Readers will see these children become adolescents, imbibing of the rebellion that the decade is known for in the lower 48 and allowing proximity to build bridges of understanding and hope, even in the midst of death and loss. Not herself Inupiaq, Edwardson (*Blessing's Bead*, 2009) makes clear in a note that this is a reflection of the childhood experiences of her contemporaries, including her husband, on whom the character of Luke is based.

--Kirkus Reviews

STARRED REVIEW

Ages 12+

Prior to the Molly Hootch Act of 1976, which required Alaska to build and staff high schools in even the smallest of the rural villages, children who wished to continue their education beyond what was offered in their communities traveled to BIA or church-supported boarding schools in the lower 48 or more populated parts of Alaska. Luke's Inupiaq experience of leaving his home near the Arctic Circle in 1960 to journey with his two younger brothers to the Catholic sponsored Sacred Heart School is based in large part on Edwardson's husband's memories of boarding school. The author unflinchingly explores both the positive and negative aspects of being away from home at such a young age. Nothing is familiar to Luke and his fellow students; the terrain, the food, the language are strange, and their struggle with feelings of homesickness and alienation is heart-wrenching. Edwardson's skillful use of dialogue and her descriptions of rural Alaska as well as boarding-school life invoke a strong sense of empathy and compassion in readers as they experience Luke's emotions along with him. It is rare that an author can write about a controversial subject such as this without prejudice. Edwardson is to be applauded for her depth of research and her ability to portray all sides of the equation in a fair and balanced manner while still creating a very enjoyable read.

--School Library Journal, Jane Henriksen Baird, Anchorage Public Library

Ages 12+

Luke Aaluk and his younger brothers Bunna and Isaac are sent by their mother to Sacred Heart, a Catholic boarding school to the south of their Alaskan community, where Eskimo and Indian students are enculturated in white customs and values. Isaac, who is technically too young to be enrolled, is promptly sent off into foster care without the consent, or even notification, of their mother. Luke and Bunna make an attempt at escape, but they are tracked down by one of the more open-minded priests and convinced they should give the school another chance. The boys conflict with the white Catholic authorities is exacerbated by tensions within the school, pitting Indians against Eskimos and the few marginalized white children also in attendance. Moreover, Cold War pressures involve many of the Inupiaq students in a government testing program in which they ingest radioactive iodine to help researchers investigate how they withstand extreme cold. Eventually leaders of the school factions realize that bonding rather than fighting is in their best interest, and they take a bold stand against the school administration by tracking down Isaac and exposing

the system of abducting indigenous children to be placed within white families. Edwardson, author of *Blessing's Bead* (BCCB 2/10), returns to the complex world of Alaskan culture and history here with this dramatic story. Readers who associate draconian Indian schools with an earlier period may be surprised to see the system continuing here well into the 1960s. Middle-schoolers who are studying the African-American civil rights movement playing out in the Lower 48 will find compelling comparisons and contrasts in the struggles of Luke and his classmates to advance into the wider world while retaining their cultural identity.

--Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, November Issue

About the Author

Debby Dahl Edwardson grew up in Minnesota, where she spent summers at her family cabin on an island in the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. She earned a BA from Colorado College, attended Nansenskolen in Norway, and has lived for over thirty years in Barrow, the northernmost community in Alaska. She earned an MFA from Vermont College in 2005. Debby and her husband George have seven children. Her picture book, *Whale Snow* (Charlesbridge, 2003), was named to the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society and the CBC/NSST lists and was named Best Picture Book by IPPY. Her first novel, *Blessing's Bead* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) was selected by the Junior Library Guild and named to the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society, ALA/YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, and Booklist's Top 10 First Novels for Youth lists. Her novel, *My Name is Not Easy*, is a 2011 National Book Award Finalist.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Micah Stahlman:

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Roxanne Jimenez:

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