

Mists on the River: Folktales from Siberia by Yeremei Aipin, illustrated by Gennady Raishev
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Review by James Ruppert, Emeritus Professor of English, University of Alaska

Oral narratives like these from the folk realm have sometimes been looked upon as fairy tales. However, such a designation tends to relegate them to juvenile entertainment rather than allow them to expand into cultural and social wisdom. While these narratives were surely told to children, people lived with them coming back to them as cultural touchstones embedding values and reminding listeners of some simple basic connections.

Picture a dark cabin with a fire going. A multi-generation family group listening to an elder tell these tales. Laughter and commentary ensue as the young ones see the humor and foolishness of some characters and the adults see the stories match parts of their experience in self-reflective moments. They may silently appreciate how clear the values are expressed or they may use the story as a way to remind the younger member of the audience of some desirable or undesirable actions. Remember these stories are communal and alive.

While the stories encode cultural values, they also always lead back to the natural world. One can feel a closeness or a unity between man and the natural world as if kinship were extended everywhere around us. The people of Siberia have traditionally seen the natural world as a place of knowledge that should be paid close attention. For these stories do not only paint a picture of nature, but they envision it as a place of transformation. The charming illustrations by Khanty artist Gennady Raishev evoke this element of imagination. Yeremei Aipin is the master storyteller responsible for the stories. He has spent his life as an educator and promoter of Khanty culture. Marina Aipin and Claude Clayton Smith provide the crisp translations with Smith doing double duty as editor.

These stories will be appreciated by both young and old as the Cuckoo, Sandpiper, Paki the Bear and others are introduced and take form. Though these words are on the page, they lead us back outdoors to the places where human and animal worlds converge.