

ORDINARY WOLVES READING GUIDE



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SETH KANTNER: AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

TRAPPER, FISHERMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER, igloo-builder, and author of *Ordinary Wolves*, Seth Kantner lives in an America most Americans have never seen. Kantner was born in a sod igloo on the Alaskan tundra and raised simply on the land—wearing mukluks before they were fashionable, eating boiled caribou pelvis, and communing with the Iñupiaq, the native Eskimos of the region.

Kantner's acclaimed novel, *Ordinary Wolves*, draws on his own boyhood and young adulthood. The story wraps readers up in the Alaskan wilderness and draws them into the hopes and fears of Cutuk, the boy at the center. Much like Cutuk, Seth Kantner was raised and home-schooled in northern Alaska. He left the igloo for the city and attended the University of Alaska and the University of Montana, where he received a bachelor's degree in journalism.



Igloo and cache under full moon.

When he was a boy, Kantner's parents gave him a camera and taught him the basics of photography. He has been documenting his surroundings ever since. He says, "As a family we took about one roll of slide film per year (more would be a waste!)" Since then, Kantner's photographs have appeared in several publications including *Alaska Geographic*.

Seth Kantner's writing and photographs have appeared in *Outside*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Alaska*, *Switch!*, and *Reader's Digest*, among other anthologies and publications. His work reflects his devotion to the land and the animals who live on it, and his belief in the importance of wildness left wild. He lives with his wife and daughter in northwest Alaska. *Ordinary Wolves* is his first novel.

Q & A WITH SETH KANTNER

Q: Whenever we think of "Great Alaskan Novels," we invariably think of Jack London. Did his writing influence you in *Ordinary Wolves*?

SETH KANTNER: Very much so. Part of the reason I became a writer was Jack. He said when you spat or pissed it crackled and froze before it hit the ground. It never did that when I was a kid—it got to 78 below one time and it never did that! But the whole world believed it did because of London. Later I realized his descriptions of the cold and north were very good. Plus he wrote and lived and drank a lot—things I could at least relate somewhat to.

Q: How authentic do you think the popular image of Alaska as the wild, rugged, uncharted West is?

SK: Depends on your perspective—in the Brooks Range in a storm in midwinter, you could say it's pretty rugged. But a lot of folks come in the summer and fall; they have GPS and satellite phones. For \$3.95 they can buy detailed USGS maps of every bend in every slough. Alaska, the Alaska I knew as a kid, is gone; the land is still here but planes fly over it relentlessly, carrying everything that Americans have too.

Q: How long does an igloo typically last?

SK: Maybe forty years at the very top. The one I was born and raised in is falling down. But if I'd kept living in it, it would be in better shape. Igloos don't like you leaving. They mold, get damp, the porcupines move in and dig holes.



Interior of igloo, with sleeping area (between pole and wall); skates hang overhead.

Q: Why did you decide to include the chapters told from the wolves' perspective? Do you feel you're anthropomorphizing or something else?

SK: Oh, probably. I like other perspectives—trees standing around rooted while humans brush past, ignoring them in their search for place and roots! The wolves were there from the beginning, and that's how I've written about them in my book.



Photo credit: Nick Jans

ORDINARY WOLVES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: In the beginning of the novel, Cutuk, Iris, and Jerry express great excitement whenever they hear the sounds of “travelers” approaching. How is the idea of “traveler” sounds returned to later in the book? How would you describe the change in feelings such sounds elicit in Cutuk at these later points?

2: Throughout the novel, and especially during “Part I: The Land,” Cutuk wants very much to become Iñupiaq. One outward, though unspoken, manifestation of this desire is his habit of flattening his nose. Another is his repeated wish for the material things—the nylon jackets and snowgos—that the younger natives in Takunak desire. But what he has learned from both Abe and Eruk is how to live the way Eskimos used to live. How, then, does he negotiate these two worlds as a child? How does he negotiate them after he's grown? And what way of being in the world does he ultimately adopt?

3: Why did Cutuk's mother leave? What effect does her leaving have on him? On Abe? Jerry? Iris? Why does the family so rarely speak of her?

4: Cutuk, Iris, and Jerry share an interesting relationship with their father, who is “like an older brother, our best friend, no dad at all,” and whom they address as Abe, rather than Dad. Why has Abe chosen to have this kind of brotherly relationship with his children, rather than what we might consider a more traditional parent-child relationship? What are some of the effects of such a relationship?

5: What are some of the childhood values and lessons Cutuk learns from Abe? How do these values serve him once he goes to Anchorage? How do they fail him?

6: Discuss Cutuk’s relationship with his two siblings, Jerry and Iris. How do Jerry and Iris compare with Cutuk in terms of their “comfort” with the world? How do their paths differ from Cutuk’s?

7: What is the importance of Eruk in Cutuk’s life? What is the significance of the carving that Eruk gives to Cutuk and what Cutuk does with it?

8: What surprises Cutuk about his interactions with white people—“his people”? If he doesn’t belong to them, and he doesn’t belong to the Inupiaq, to whom does he belong?

9: Why does it become so important to Cutuk to learn to fly his grandfather’s plane?

10: What is Cutuk’s attitude toward money? What role does it play in his life?

11: Discuss Cutuk’s relationships with the two women in his life, Dawna and Cheryl. How do his feelings for Dawna change—or do they change?—from childhood to adulthood?

12: What is the relationship between Cutuk’s story and the short passages about the wolves? What does it mean that most of these passages involve scenes of the wolves being hunted down and killed? What is the significance of the scene in which Cutuk and one of the wolves see each other?

13: What is Cutuk’s reaction to the state of things in the Inupiaq village of Takunak? How does it change over time?

14: What does Cutuk mean when he says, “I’m not going to be a dog. I’ll take the wolf’s deal?”