

Polar Perspectives

March 2010

Quill & Quire

By Cheri Hanson

An Inuit-owned publishing house fills a major cultural void

It's not easy being Canada's northernmost publisher. But for Nunavut's Inhabit Media, which has its head office in Iqaluit, doing business above the 60th parallel has proven a winning proposition. Steeped in spirits, mythology, and traditional Inuit knowledge, the three-year-old firm has filled a cultural and language-resource gap by publishing classroom-friendly, bilingual editions that preserve the oral stories of the Canadian Arctic for a new generation.

Inhabit sprang from the roots of a non-profit organization known as the Nunavut Bilingual Education Society, founded seven years ago by a group of educators, language specialists, artists, cultural performers, and storytellers. One of the group's founding members, Louise Flaherty, approached local education professor (and NBES member) Neil Christopher with the idea of starting an Inuit-owned publishing company that would give northern voices and perspectives a place in Canadian publishing.

Flaherty, who is Inuit, eventually joined forces with Ottawa-born Christopher and his brother, Danny, to launch the press using their own money. (Flaherty is the majority owner, while Neil Christopher is a managing partner and Danny Christopher serves as art director.) Currently, only the founding trio is on the company's payroll, with all other services, such as illustration and layout, being outsourced. Flaherty and Neil Christopher serve as the head editors on each book project, with additional feedback from a three- or four-person cultural review board assembled for each publication.

Given Iqaluit's notoriously high cost of living (and cost of doing business), the trio relies heavily on funding from both the territorial and federal governments to keep the press afloat. The bulk of Inhabit's grant money comes from Nunavut funds earmarked to support the Inuit Language Protection Act, says Neil Christopher, and in 2009-10 the company received \$20,000 from the Canada Council's Grants to Aboriginal Writers, Storytellers, and Publishers program. In the last several years, the press has also accessed funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage and several Nunavut government ministries, which have purchased bulk copies of titles such as *Walking with Aalasi* by Aalasi

Joamie. “The Department of Environment has been very supportive,” says Christopher. “If they’re doing an educational program, it’s not unusual for them to buy 1,000 copies or so.”

Inhabit’s bilingual editions serve an educational market desperate for classroom materials written in Inuktitut (the Inuit language) that explore cultural themes relevant to Nunavut, the Arctic, and its indigenous peoples. Most Nunavut children attend classes taught in Inuktitut until Grade 3, but there are few textbooks and resources that support the curriculum. “Most Inuktitut-speaking teachers make their materials from scratch and photocopy like hell all year,” says Sara Minogue, an Iqaluit-based journalist and spokesperson for Inhabit.

According to Christopher, Nunavut’s District Education Authorities give schools more autonomy to choose classroom materials than their southern counterparts, allowing individual teachers and principals to select resources that fit their community’s dialect and cultural nuances. That said, Nunavut’s Department of Education does have a teaching and learning centre that makes curriculum-specific resources, and Inhabit tries to avoid encroaching on its territory. “What we’re doing is developing books that can fit into schools,” Christopher says, “books that tell stories from northern perspectives.”

So far, teachers and college administrators have been appreciative of Inhabit’s bilingual publishing program. “The faculty are ecstatic to have materials that they can work with,” says Cindy Cowan, director of community programs for Nunavut Arctic College. “It’s hard to develop culturally sensitive lesson plans and use materials that reflect the culture if there isn’t anything out there.”

To date, the college has adopted four Inhabit titles as official course materials, including *Walking with Aalasi* (a blend of botany and autobiography) and three books of oral myths, stories, and legends: *Unipkaaqtuat Arvianit* by Inuit elder Mark Kalluak, *Stories of the Amautalik* by Neil Christopher and Louise Flaherty, and *Akinirmut Unipkaaqtuat* by Noel McDermott and Maaki Kakkik. (The first three titles have sold about 1,000 copies each, while *Akinirmut Unipkaaqtuat* has sold nearly 3,000.) Additionally, *Kaakuluk* and *Pivut*, two magazines co-published by Inhabit and the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, are distributed in Nunavut schools.

While Inhabit has found a ready institutional market in the North, Christopher says the company is eager to attract a broader readership and become less reliant on grant money. “One of our challenges is to

shift from educational publications to ones that will sell in the south,” he explains. “We want to get our books out of the native studies section.” With an eye on that target, Inhabit has hired a Toronto-based editor and project manager, while Christopher has taken a year-long sabbatical from his teaching position at Nunavut Arctic College to oversee the company’s expansion. In fact, Inhabit has already established some roots in the Greater Toronto Area: the company’s southern housing and distribution is handled by Markham-based Fitzhenry & Whiteside, which, depending on anticipated sales, ships several hundred or thousand books up north to a rented storage facility in Iqaluit.

For Christopher and the team, growing the press, which published five titles in 2009 and reported roughly \$90,000 in net sales, is less a business strategy and more a matter of cultural survival – and the clock is ticking. The last generation of Inuit elders who lived traditional lifestyles is passing away, says Christopher. “That’s why we’re investing our own money and trying to expand quickly. A lot of these old stories and perspectives and oral history will disappear. If we wait another 10 years, the opportunity has passed. It’s gone.”