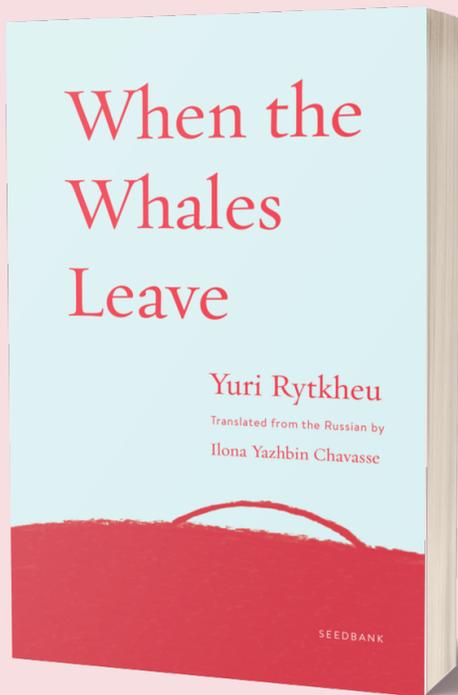


WHEN THE WHALES LEAVE

BY YURI RYTKHEU

TRANSLATED BY ILONA YAZHBIN CHAVASSE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the introduction Gretel Ehrlich mentions that Yuri knew the necessity of holding culture in your mind and heart to keep it from falling apart. What's something from your culture that you hold closely?
2. The tradition of subsistence hunting in the north is threatened by communism and open market economy. Every time someone leaves the village for a wage or salary, traditional culture disappears a little more. What is something we can do to preserve this piece of Indigenous culture? Do you think modern society and tradition can coexist? Why or why not?
3. In *When the Whales Leave*, Nau dispenses wisdom and warnings about what will happen if we forget and disrespect our ancestors and environment. Where can you apply these lessons to your own life? What do these warnings mean to you?
4. Nau becomes an ageless legend amongst her people, surviving generations and generations of her own family. What is the significance of her long life? Why is it important that Nau lives when Reu dies? What does it mean for her people when Nau finally does die?
5. Despite his origins Reu chose to leave his family of whales behind to live on land with his beloved Nau, creating an everlasting bond between whales and humans. Until the end of the book, whales are to be celebrated and revered, but we know today they are a main source of subsistence to many villages. How can this relationship remain mutual? What can humans provide nature that will strengthen the bond?
6. Nau insists that there is always reason in response to mystery but that it is not necessary to believe. The simplicity of her answers disturbs her descendent Enu who cannot fathom her lack of rationality. This inspires more questions about our beliefs: Where do our beliefs come from? What makes us believe one thing versus another? How much should reason play into belief?
7. In *When the Whales Leave*, Great Love is a mysterious gift given to Nau from Reu that birthed thought and speech, separating humans from whales. This implies that our Great Love comes from the earth and nature and makes us who we are as people. When have you experienced a Great Love in your life and how has it shaped you?
8. Three men left the tribal village in search of a forever summer along the sunrise. According to their stories, they followed the whales and reached the edge of the world and knew they were at the promised land but turned back home knowing that life wasn't for them. What does this say about the strength of familial and cultural bonds? Why would these men travel so far for so long just to turn around when they arrive at their destination?
9. At the end of his life, Givu asks Nau if she could die from a wound and she cries telling him, "How could a person raise their hand to another person? He would cease to be human, the moment he did another person harm." Having asked the dangerous questions, Givu's demise quickened. How is violence against humans different from violence against nature?
10. As part of the Seedbank series, *When the Whales Leave* can be regarded as a guide for reflection on our relationship to the world around us. In what ways does this book challenge and broaden your perception of the world and humanity?



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SYNOPSIS

Buoyantly translated into English for the first time by Ilona Yazhbin Chavasse, *When the Whales Leave* is at once a vibrant retelling of the origin story of the Chukchi, a timely warning about the destructive power of human ego, and an unforgettable work of fiction from Yuri Rytkheu.

The parable follows Nau, the mother of human life, as she tries to pass down history and tradition to her descendants. Having loved and become one with whales, she shares stories of brotherhood between the two species. But as these origins grow more distant, the old woman's tales are subsumed into myth—and her descendants turn increasingly bent on parading their dominance over the natural world.

Following Nau's lineage, we see her own children and great-grandchildren struggle with the natural way of things. Each generation grows wearier and more obsessed with power and control. Despite Nau's warnings that reason is not necessary for belief, her people struggle to accept her wisdom. Eventually, her descendent Armagirgin murders a whale in cold blood and a show of strength which ends not only Nau's life but the village's connection to nature.

ABOUT THE SEEDBANK SERIES

This new series of world literature expands Milkweed's publishing program to bring ancient, historical, and contemporary works from cultures from around the world to American readers. Just as repositories around the world gather seeds to ensure biodiversity in the future, Seedbank gathers works of literature from around the world that foster conversation and reflection on the human relationship to place and the natural world—exposing readers to new, endangered, and forgotten ways of seeing the world.