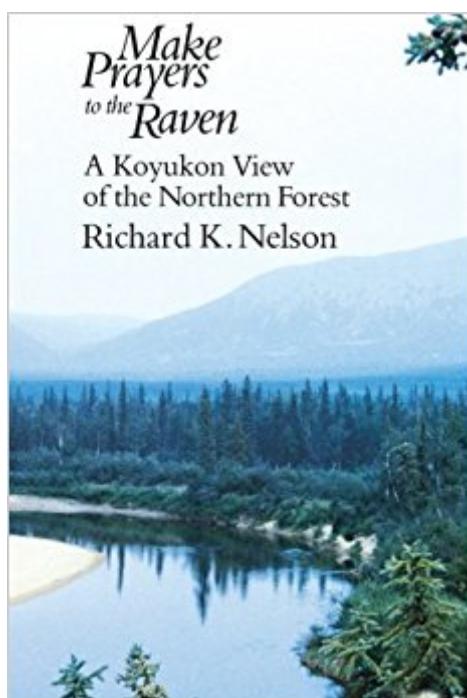


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# Make Prayers To The Raven: A Koyukon View Of The Northern Forest



## Synopsis

"Nelson spent a year among the Koyukon people of western Alaska, studying their intimate relationship with animals and the land. His chronicle of that visit represents a thorough and elegant account of the mystical connection between Native Americans and the natural world." •Outside" This admirable reflection on the natural history of the Koyukon River drainage in Alaska is founded on knowledge the author gained as a student of the Koyukon culture, indigenous to that region. He presents these Athapaskan views of the land •principally of its animals and Koyukon relationships with those creatures• together with a measured account of his own experiences and doubts. . . . For someone in search of a native American expression of 'ecology' and natural history, I can think of no better place to begin than with this work." •Barry Lopez, Orion Nature Quarterly" Far from being a romantic attempt to pass on the spiritual lore of Native Americans for a quick fix by others, this is a very serious ethnographic study of some Alaskan Indians in the Northern Forest area. . . . He has painstakingly regarded their views of earth, sky, water, mammals and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. He does admire their love of nature and spirit. Those who see the world through his eyes using their eyes will likely come away with new respect for the boreal forest and those who live with it and in it, not against it." •The Christian Century" In *Make Prayers to the Raven* Nelson reveals to us the Koyukon beliefs and attitudes toward the fauna that surround them in their forested habitat close to the lower Yukon. . . . Nelson's presentation also gives rich insights into the Koyukon subsistence cycle through the year and into the hardships of life in this northern region. The book is written with both brain and heart. . . . This book represents a landmark: never before has the integration of American Indians with their environment been so well spelled out." •Ake Hultkrantz, *Journal of Forest History*

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

If you are interested with Alaska Native culture like I am, you will love this book. If you aren't then you won't, simple as that. Being I am, I couldn't put it down. The mythology and the lifestyle of the Koyukon people and how the two were intertwined were endlessly fascinating to me. This is already one of my favorite books of all time and will always have a place on my bookshelf.

Richard Nelson is hard to put down. I've read and re-read his books, and really love his radio shows. This man's passion and spirit shine through his works. I give his books as gifts to dear friends.

I found this book difficult to get through. Very long, drawn out descriptions of uninteresting areas of the culture, and then it skims over areas which are more interesting. It is possible that the focuses are simply accurate to the culture though.

Read this years ago but it was missing--probably a loan to a friend or University student. Richard Nelson is an exceptional writer and sensitive voice for native cultures.

Wonderful story. Helps to understand how powerful stories are.

This is a GREAT book and I would absolutely recommend it to other readers who enjoy Alaskan Native stories and contexts. Very enjoyable. J.

In 1976 and 1977, anthropologist Richard Nelson lived with the Koyukon people of northwestern Alaska. Their vast forested homeland is in the region where the Koyukuk River feeds into the Yukon River. They are Athapaskan people, and they live inland from the Inupiaq Eskimos, who inhabit the coastal region to the west. When Russian explorers found the Koyukon in 1838, they already had tobacco, iron pots, and other stuff, acquired via trade with Eskimos. They had already been

hammered by smallpox. In 1898, they experienced a sudden infestation of gold prospectors; luckily, their streams were gold-free. Unluckily, the gold rush ended their isolation from white society. Swarms of missionaries and educators buzzed around the forest, determined to help the ignorant heathens rise out of barbarism, and experience the miracles of civilization and damnation. When Nelson arrived in 1976, they were no longer nomadic. About 2,000 Koyukon lived in eleven villages. They travelled by snowmobile, hunted with rifles, and worshipped a Jewish guru. Most of those under 30 spoke only English, and some were not fond of anthropologists. Nelson spent a lot of time with the elders, who had been raised in the old ways. Then he wrote an important book, *Make Prayers to the Raven*. (In their stories, the creator was Raven.) The Koyukon were the opposite of vegans. About 90 percent of their diet was animal foods. The bears, moose, geese, and salmon they ate came from the surrounding area, and were killed, butchered, and cooked by close friends and family. Their survival depended on the wildlife. They were extremely careful to take only what they needed, and to waste nothing. Their wilderness was the opposite of big box grocery outlets that have an endless supply of fizzy sugar drinks, frozen pizza, and corn chips. A year of abundant salmon might be followed by a meager year. During Nelson's visit, there were plenty moose and caribou, animals that had been scarce 30 years earlier. The Koyukon had to pay close attention to the land, and continually fine-tune their relationship to it. When times were lean, people starved prior to the adaptation of rifles. Now, they also had dependable access to the mysterious industrial substances that white folks referred to as

"food." Traditional Koyukon society needed nothing from the outside world. Their relationship to the ecosystem was one of absolute reverence and respect. They were not masters or managers, they were simply members of the family of life. The humble status of humans is evident in a frequently quoted phrase: "Every animal knows way more than you do." Nelson said it like this: "Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with proper respect. All things in nature have a special kind of life, something unknown to contemporary Euro-Americans, something powerful." The Koyukon were not exotic freaks. Their worldview and spirituality had much in common with all other cultures that thrived in the long era before the domestication fad. They were perfectly wild and free healthy, happy, intelligent, normal human beings. Most modern people go to their graves without ever experiencing the magnificent beauty and power of the living world

ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  • the joy and wonder of the gift of life, the awe of being fully present in a sacred reality. Most of them live and die in monotonous manmade habitats, having established no spiritual connection to life. Nelson was born in Madison, Wisconsin. His father was employed by the state. Their middle class life provided food, clothing, and shelter. A large portion of his childhood was spent in institutions of education ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  • indoors ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  • digesting, memorizing, and regurgitating words and numbers. At that time, Madison was a disaster of concrete, traffic, and hordes of strangers. Decades earlier, the forest and wildlife had been devoured by the metastasizing city. So, as a young animal, Nelson was raised in devastating poverty, like most modern kids, isolated from wildness and freedom. Anyway, something cool happened. In 1973, Nelson hooked up with the University of Alaska and began spending time with Native Americans. He arrived with his Euro-American cultural programming, and its wacky anthropocentric model of the natural world. He had zero doubt that his perception of reality was correct and proper; it was absolute truth. Then, he hung out with the Koyukon, and this blew his belief system completely out of the water. They were intelligent people, and they saw the world in a very different way. This made his Ph.D. mind whirl and spin. ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  “My Koyukon teachers had learned through their own traditions about dimensions in nature that I, as a Euro-American, had either not learned to perceive or had been explicitly taught do not exist.” In less than 200 years, the white wizards of Wisconsin have transformed a healthy wilderness into a hideous nightmare called Madison. It never occurred to them to adapt to the ecosystem, live with great respect and mindfulness, and preserve its health for future generations. The Koyukon, on the other hand, have inhabited their forest for thousands of years, and it doesn’t look much different from how they found it. They know every place in their forest as well as you know your kitchen. Every location is rich with stories and spirits. The Egyptians built huge pyramids, enduring monuments to their civilized megalomania, built by legions of miserable slaves. The Koyukon have achieved something far more impressive. ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  “This legacy is the vast land itself, enduring and essentially unchanged despite having supported human life for countless centuries.” Nelson’s book is a reflection of their culture. He presents separate chapters to describe the physical realm and climate, insects and amphibians, fishes, birds, small mammals, predators, and large animals. Eighteen pages are devoted to their relationship with bears, and birds get 43 pages. The core of their culture is their relationships with the non-human relatives that share their land, and the need to nurture these relationships with absolute respect. Nature always punishes acts of disrespect with bad luck, illness, or death to the offender, or to a family member. The good news here is that

it's not impossible for a highly educated adult to override their toxic cultural programming and experience the beauty and power of creation. Most never do. The important message of this book is that we are absolutely lost, but there are paths that are not lost, healthy paths. Our cage is not locked, and it's so much nicer outside. It's alive!

An intriguing account of the boreal forest ecosystem on the Koyukuk River in Alaska and the Native people living there. Although it is an anthropological study, it is far from a dry read. Nelson's writing successfully evokes the mystery of this harsh environment while describing the spiritual and cultural traditions of the Koyukon people. Nelson provides a window on a way of life that unfortunately seems so alien today -- one that incorporates reverence for all of nature in almost every detail of daily life. I couldn't help but envy these people and their way of life, and it caused me to reflect on how different our world would be if we had adopted indigenous values rather than trying to exterminate them. I wish, however, that Nelson would have elucidated on his passing references to how (when he was living among them in the 1970s) the traditional way of life was becoming increasingly ignored by the younger generation. I hope those traditions have survived; I suspect they have, as the raven continues to call in those woods.

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