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# The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change by Sheila Watt-Cloutier

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**The World's Sentinels: Teaching Climate Change from Northern Indigenous Communities**

***The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change*** by **SHEILA WATT-CLOUTIER**
University of Minnesota Press, 2018
$22.95 USD

Reviewed by **LEAH VAN DYK**

"The world I was born into has changed forever" (xv): so begins Sheila Watt-Cloutier in her memoir and call-to-action, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change*. Negotiating the social, political, economic, and cultural changes of the last sixty years, Watt-Cloutier's words seem to welcome a narrative of justifiable anger, fear, and frustration. Instead, Watt-Cloutier offers us enormous and somewhat inconceivable patience, wisdom, guidance, and even hope. Originally published in 2015 by Penguin Canada, Watt-Cloutier's message continues to resonate in our progress-driven and unsustainable world.

Born in 1953 in Kuujjuag, an Inuit community in Northern Quebec, Watt-Cloutier grew up surrounded by family and her tight-knit community, spending much of her time outdoors. She notes throughout her narrative that her mother and grandmother greatly influenced her life; and, indeed, well into adulthood, Watt-Cloutier was guided by the knowledge passed on to her from these maternal figures and was further influenced by her own maternal instincts. This communal presence is evident throughout her narrative, as Watt-Cloutier continually decenters herself to instead promote the needs and desires of her people and other Northern Indigenous communities. Her humble disavowal of her own accomplishments—which are many—reinforces Watt-Cloutier's insistence on her role as a figurehead for the traditional knowledge and experiences of her people.

Watt-Cloutier's journey began with her passion to help Inuit youth and to rectify the education system in the North. The system in place provided unrelatable Southern curriculums, resulting in disinterested students and proving detrimental to any who wished to seek further education in the South. Education was not the only factor affecting Inuit youth: rapid social change and culture loss, addiction, economic instability, and intergenerational trauma all contributed to feelings of hopelessness and apathy in Inuit youth. As she notes,

> The many discussions the task force had with our communities made one thing clear to all of us: if our education system did not respect or challenge the creative potential and intelligence of our children, it would crush them, not liberate them. (111)

Watt-Cloutier, along with the Kativik Education Task Force, made great strides in developing an education system which reflects Inuit culture and practices as well as adequately prepares students for further education. But, as she notes, a larger stage was calling.

Watt-Cloutier became the corporate secretary and then the president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council of Canada (ICC Canada). She also became the ICC's spokesperson against persistent organic pollutants (POPs), and it was here that "my life's work found me" (123). POPs are

produced through pesticide use and industrial processes, and in the 1980s, scientists discovered that the concentrations of POP contaminants in "marine and human life of the Arctic were five to ten times higher than they were in the Great Lakes" (133). This is in part due to the condensation of POPs in cold air and their high solubility in fat, as Watt-Cloutier explains:

> [POPs] don't get evenly distributed—they move relentlessly from warm to cold. They are a bit like a pinball. They can bounce around for a long time, but eventually there is only one place they end up: the coldest climates on earth. In other words, Arctic land and waters. (134)

The ICC's push for the regulation of harmful POPs was enacted on a global scale, involving governments, industries, activist groups, and other concerned parties;

> Our challenges were local, but they were part of something global. Our problems were not made in the Arctic. So our solutions couldn't be entirely local either. We could not look only inward. (121)

Watt-Cloutier's push for universal action and stewardship is rooted in her Inuit culture and history, as she refers to Northern Indigenous peoples as the sentinels of the world, who seek to warn us of the dangers which are not coming, but are already here. She writes that "the Arctic is the barometer of the health of the planet. If the Arctic is poisoned, so are we all" (142).

Sheila Watt-Cloutier teaches what the Inuk have known for decades, and what we desperately need to accept: the world is changing, and not necessarily for the better. The successive issues she champions are painstakingly detailed in her writing, but it is the resilience of the advocate herself which gives life to this memoir. Not only does this book provide a necessary education for everyone, beyond those already engaging with climate change, but it also tells a very human story—of trials, joy, frustration, pain, and hope.

**LEAH VAN DYK** is a graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. She studies the intersections of ecocritical/environmental discourse and cultural theory. Her recent work includes a study of ecofeminism and fairy tales.