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Author gives voice to Inuit people isolated by ice

National Geographic contributor says cultural immersion enriches reporting

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Nature writer and adventurer Gretel Ehrlich doesn't believe in learning about cultural traditions through history books. Instead, she makes a point of going straight to the source.

"The pen never preceded the moment," Ehrlich told a crowd of 20 people Monday afternoon in Fisk Hall as part of the Literature of Fact lecture series.

Ehrlich, the author of eight books and a contributor to *The New Yorker*, *Time* and *National Geographic*, spoke candidly to the audience about her most recent work. The non-fiction story "This Cold Heaven" discusses the lives and history of the Inuit people who have lived in Greenland for almost 5,000 years. Ehrlich spent parts of seven years in the Arctic Circle to gain perspective on the reality of life in a country "isolated by ice."

"I try to immerse myself wherever I am, just completely surrender to a place," Ehrlich said. "I just ask myself, whose truth am I telling here?"

Ehrlich said she was exposed to the Inuit culture when she traveled through Greenland with subsistence hunters and stayed with Danish and Inuit friends in villages. She described learning some of the Greenlandic language from children and traveling across the vast plains of ice on dogsleds.

Ehrlich said she initially was drawn to the Inuit people because their culture has little written history. Her goal has been to capture the voices left out of history, she said.

"I think of the pain of the world finding a way to express itself in words," she said.

The author promotes research as a way to get a "fresher version" of her subject matter. Ehrlich said she did most of her research for "This Cold Heaven" in the field, listening to oral tradition and learning to communicate with the Inuit people. The first step of research is to find a storyteller, usually the oldest person in the village, and listen to everything he or she has to say about the village's history, she said.

"After a while, it all comes down to passion and solitude, hunger and joy," she said.

In response to a question about how she manages her personal life while researching for a book, Ehrlich said she spends months writing and then takes time off to reconnect with friends.

"Yeah, I have a personal life," she joked. "I lived in a tent with my dogs for six months."

Emily Goligoski, a Medill freshman, said she appreciated Ehrlich's method of writing.

"She really pours everything she has into broadening what people think about a place and a culture," she said.

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