

## Essay-Contest 2017/18

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### Jean Briggs

Jean L. Briggs passed away on July 27, 2016 at the age of 87 in St. Clare's Hospital, St. John's, Newfoundland. With her death, the world lost an anthropologist who had devoted big parts of her life to the observation and the recording of the Inuit's life. Raised in Maine and Massachusetts, Briggs started her academic career with a bachelor's degree from Vassar College in 1951, a master's degree from Boston University in 1960 and finally her Ph.D. from the famous Harvard University in 1967. During her life she often moved to different places like Israel, Italy, Siberia, Alaska, and lived there for a while to support her studies. After completing her Ph.D. in 1967 Briggs moved to Newfoundland in Canada and started to work at Memorial University in St. John's. But in contrast to her other stays in foreign countries, Jean Briggs settled there and taught at Memorial University for almost 50 years.

In the 1960s this impressive woman collected information for a book during her 18-month-long field study in the Canadian Northwest Territories. Briggs arrived with only a very weak knowledge of the Inuit language, knowing not more than a few expressions like "yes", "no", "have some tea", "have some more tea" and "thank you". Briggs wanted to find out about the Inuit's culture, their language and life. During this stay, the anthropologist observed an Inuit family and lived with them in their igloos and tents, and furthermore became relatively fluent in their language herself. She also found out that a big part of the Inuit conversation was non-verbal. In 1970, three years after she had started teaching at university, Briggs published her now world-famous book "Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family". In this book she described the connections between the different members of this Inuit family, their dealing with emotions, the social training of their children and the behaviour towards their neighbours during daily life. Some years later Jean Briggs published a second book within the same main topic. It was called "Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-Year-Old." In this book she observed the Inuit while they raised their children, described how they trained them and how they handled good or bad behaviour. With this book the author won two important book awards, the Boyer Prize and the Victor Turner Prize.

In the year of the publication of "Never in Anger", 1970, Briggs started to compile words

from Utkuhiksalingmiut Inuktitut – short name Utkuhiksalik, a dialect of Inuktitut – and expanded this summary until the year 2015. In this year she published the final bilingual dictionary with the help of other researchers from Memorial University and the University of Toronto, who supported her as linguists, as Briggs was not a professional linguist herself. Beside its content, the dictionary had a very appealing cover, illustrated by a female Inuit artist who spoke this dialect herself. It contained the impressive amount of 34,000 words. At the time of its publication, this collection was known as the first dictionary of the Utkuhiksalingmiut Inuktitut dialect. The dictionary is mostly a collection of postbases, which are pieces inside longer words. A single word in the Inuit language can be as complex as a whole sentence in English. Most of the postbases that can be found in the dictionary were from Briggs' field studies, recorded in real-life situations with the Inuit. The main aim of this dictionary was to get younger speakers to understand and enlarge their knowledge of this dialect and to support language teachers. With this yearlong effort Briggs contributed a huge part in the preservation of this special language.

Becoming a famous writer, Jean Briggs mentioned three different reasons for writing and publishing. Her book "Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family" was her doctoral dissertation to complete her Ph.D. at Harvard University. With her second book "Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-Year-Old" she wanted to give something back to all the different groups that had supported her during her studies. The third reason for writing were lots of invitations to conferences and workshops, where she talked about her work. All her writing had a very personal style, not the often expected academic tone. The motivation for all three reasons came from the thought that she could also relive the experiences she had made during her stay with the Inuit, the things she had learned there about nature, culture and herself.

As a woman anthropologist in the sixties, Briggs' field studies were not seen as normal at this time. Lots of people discouraged her from going and living with the Inuit for a long time. But she insisted and can therefore be called a pioneer in this area. She chose a family with an already married couple so that nobody could think she was looking for a husband herself. While she lived with her Inuit family, her gender also had its advantages: For example, she didn't have to go hunting with the other men, but could stay with the rest of the family and

work on her studies. All these impressions and experiences throughout her life with the Canadian Inuit, but also with the Alaskan Inupiat and the Siberian Yupik, made her a convinced environmentalist back home. She built a house outside St. John's, far from the roads and without running water or electricity for a long time. In this house she slept on a sleeping platform, not a bed, like she had done during her stay with the Inuit. After her retirement she was a passionate hiker and photographer and never stopped observing the world around her.

In an interview Dr. Jean Briggs mentioned her lifelong motto: "Everything that happens is data. Mistakes are good things. You can learn more from making mistakes than from getting it right." These are remarkable and true words from an excellent anthropologist, a brave researcher and an impressive woman.

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