Review of *Wo(men) and Bears: The Gifts of Nature, Culture and Gender Revisited*, edited by Kaarina Kailo. INANNA Publications and Education Inc., 2008.

Afra Kavanagh and Gina Granter

Afra: A colourful painting of a naked woman joyfully embracing a bear under a benevolent night sky is the cover art by Irma Heiskanin that introduces this 387 page volume of folktales, art, poetry, drama, and an interview by 28 international contributors, who approach the material from a variety of disciplines such as folklore, anthropology, ecofeminism, cultural studies, comparative religion, and etymology.

Gina: In literature departments, as in any academic department, we are too often bound by parameters to limit the scope of our research: in my field, those borders are generally national, temporal, linguistic, and/or genre-based. When I set out to study bears in literature, I felt constrained at first by having to pick a national focus for my work. I therefore admired Kaarina Kailo's breaking down of national divisions to highlight affinities between stories of women and bears in various Northern cultures. While the book's scope is ambitious, in execution it reminds me of why academics need to tighten their fields of inquiry; it seems a project based more on enthusiasm than scholarly rigour.

Afra: INANNA Publications, the publisher, whose email address and website are hosted by York University, declares: "Our priorities are to publish literary books, in particular by fresh, new Canadian voices, that are intellectually **rigorous**, speak to **women's hearts** and tell truths about the lives of the broad diversity of Canadian women—smart books for people who want to **read and think** [emphasis added] about real women's lives." But where is the invitation to readers to act on their beliefs?

Gina: Since I study bears in Canadian literature in English, I thought this book would be extremely relevant to my work: I consider myself a target audience member. While I learned a lot from the collection, and appreciate especially the emphasis on stories specific to individual cultures rather than broad generalizations about beliefs held nationally or by large groups of people, I found little that I could practically apply to or integrate with my own readings of texts.

Afra: The essays seemed to focus on human societies and to wish for a more harmonious existence with the environment because that would provide women with better lives, more respect and power. Previous writing in this area (such as Adams and Donovan's *Women and Animals*, 1999) analyzes oppression and offers "a vision of liberation that extends to other life forms besides human beings."

Gina: The eclectic nature of the collection is admirable in theory, but in practice it is hard for the reader to pick up the connective threads between works, or to see the justification for the inclusion

of all works. I read the work not in the order that pieces appeared but according to my own interest, and in some cases, attention span.

Afra: Kailo has accepted essays that share a view, but not a methodology. The generic medley does invite “sampling,” but many editors would have forced some order on the materials, and by groupings the works, created a perspective.

Gina: There are many good ideas at the centre of this project, but the practical application of the ideas to specific fields is a challenge to consider. Also, Kailo’s bear puns are excessive and detract from the seriousness of her mission. Her emphasis on the “gift imaginary” offers alternatives to the present hierarchal economy that dominates discourse today, but this and other ideas get lost in the surfeit of information in this book.

Afra: That’s because there is some repetition and duplication. It is also a weakness that many of the writers treat the folktales as important documents of these societies; to my mind, folktales are imaginative artifacts from these cultures, not histories. While I found little argument or “proof” here, I will say in the book’s defense, that to some extent, one “experiences” this book rather than just “reads” it.

Gina: There are great works in this volume, but this is not a must-read collection; instead, it is a source of a number of valuable pieces of writing. Among the works I found most interesting are Trott’s “Bear Symbolism and the Third Sex Among the Inuit” for its illuminating explanation, complete with useful diagrams, of the polar bear’s significance in Inuit cosmology; Guédon’s “Of Big Animals, Women and Shamans in Nasbena Country” for its blend of research and personal narrative, and its emphasis on the transcendence of symbolism in Dene rituals centered on bears. Finally, I admired the inclusion of L. B. Halfe’s poem “*Nōkhom*, Medicine Bear.” It was the first poem of Halfe’s that I read, some years ago, and it was the portal into an admiration of her entire body of work. My choices are based on the works’ quality, but also likely the result of my field of study; similarly, any academic interested in the environment and/or gender will find a few useful works in this collection.

Afra: My favourites were Wacoquaakmik’s “The Warrior Way and the Bear” for its concern with real-world application of the author’s reflections on the bear; Kremer’s “*Bearing Obligations*” which has the most interesting notes, and which, like Wacoquaakmik’s, is a personal narrative. I also enjoyed Vickers’ “The Princess and the Bears” for its directness and simplicity.

There are many good ideas at the centre of this project. Many of the attitudes and rituals described are worthy of our approval and, possibly, adoption. The sense of loss that pervades the works and this act of retrieval are sufficient “*raisons d’être*.” Also admirable is the effort to promote the notion that the various cultures that observed rituals of the “gift imaginary” (versus the exchange economy of today) also honoured bears and women, and created gentler, kinder communities.