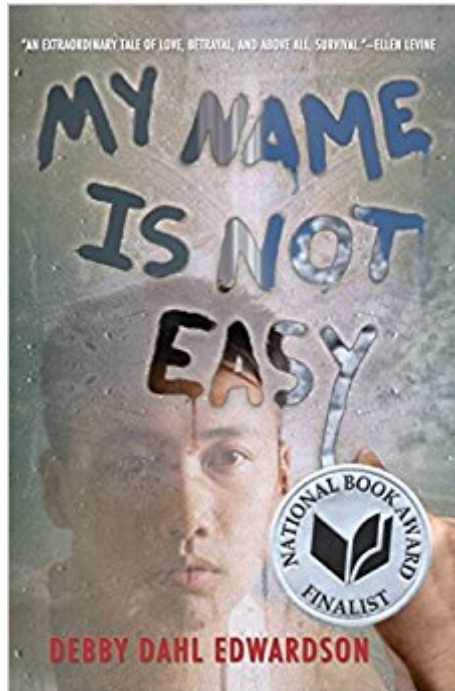




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# My Name Is Not Easy



## Synopsis

My name is not easy. My name is hard like ocean ice grinding the shore...Luke knows his IñfĀ upiaq name is full of sounds white people can't say. So he leaves it behind when he and his brothers are sent to boarding school hundreds of miles away from their Arctic village. At Sacred Heart School, students •Eskimo, Indian, White line up on different sides of the cafeteria like there's some kind of war going on. Here, speaking IñfĀ upiaq or any native language is forbidden. And Father Mullen, whose fury is like a force of nature, is ready to slap down those who disobey. Luke struggles to survive at Sacred Heart. But he's not the only one. There's smart-aleck Amiq, a daring leader if he doesn't self-destruct; Chickie, blond and freckled, a different kind of outsider; and small, quiet Junior, noticing everything and writing it all down. They each have their own story to tell. But once their separate stories come together, things at Sacred Heart School and the wider world will never be the same.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Told by five different narrators covering the time period 1960-65, this is essentially Luke's story, whose native and, as the title indicates, difficult-to-pronounce name is not revealed until toward the end. Forbidden to use their language, fed unfamiliar food and under the thumb of priests and nuns, some strict and some kind but whose religion is unfamiliar, Luke's homesickness is visceral. The good wishes and intentions of other children, their teachers and their parents all fail to offer comfort or to soften the hardships endured. Details of the outside world and the concerns of the day are

woven in to the narrative, often highlighting how astonishingly oblivious the world is to the reality of life in Alaska. The rivalry between Indian and Eskimo is made equally vivid, along with the stereotypes and bias that both sides believe about the other. Readers will see these children become adolescents, imbibing of the rebellion that the decade is known for in the lower 48 and allowing proximity to build bridges of understanding and hope, even in the midst of death and loss. Not herself Inupiaq, Edwardson (Blessing's Bead, 2009) makes clear in a note that this is a reflection of the childhood experiences of her contemporaries, including her husband, on whom the character of Luke is based.--Kirkus ReviewsSTARRED REVIEWAges 12+Prior to the Molly Hootch Act of 1976, which required Alaska to build and staff high schools in even the smallest of the rural villages, children who wished to continue their education beyond what was offered in their communities traveled to BIA or church-supported boarding schools in the lower 48 or more populated parts of Alaska. Luke's Inupiaq experience of leaving his home near the Arctic Circle in 1960 to journey with his two younger brothers to the Catholic sponsored Sacred Heart School is based in large part on Edwardson's husband's memories of boarding school. The author unflinchingly explores both the positive and negative aspects of being away from home at such a young age. Nothing is familiar to Luke and his fellow students; the terrain, the food, the language are strange, and their struggle with feelings of homesickness and alienation is heart-wrenching. Edwardson's skillful use of dialogue and her descriptions of rural Alaska as well as boarding-school life invoke a strong sense of empathy and compassion in readers as they experience Luke's emotions along with him. It is rare that an author can write about a controversial subject such as this without prejudice. Edwardson is to be applauded for her depth of research and her ability to portray all sides of the equation in a fair and balanced manner while still creating a very enjoyable read.--School Library Journal, Jane Henriksen Baird, Anchorage Public LibraryAges 12+Luke Aaluk and his younger brothers Bunna and Isaac are sent by their mother to Sacred Heart, a Catholic boarding school to the south of their Alaskan community, where Eskimo and Indian students are enculturated in white customs and values. Isaac, who is technically too young to be enrolled, is promptly sent off into foster care without the consent, or even notification, of their mother. Luke and Bunna make an attempt at escape, but they are tracked down by one of the more open-minded priests and convinced they should give the school another chance. The boys conflict with the white Catholic authorities is exacerbated by tensions within the school, pitting Indians against Eskimos and the few marginalized white children also in attendance. Moreover, Cold War pressures involve many of the Inupiaq students in a government testing program in which they ingest radioactive iodine to help researchers investigate how they withstand extreme cold. Eventually leaders of the

school factions realize that bonding rather than fighting is in their best interest, and they take a bold stand against the school administration by tracking down Isaac and exposing the system of abducting indigenous children to be placed within white families. Edwardson, author of *Blessing's Bead* (BCCB 2/10), returns to the complex world of Alaskan culture and history here with this dramatic story. Readers who associate draconian Indian schools with an earlier period may be surprised to see the system continuing here well into the 1960s. Middle-schoolers who are studying the African-American civil rights movement playing out in the Lower 48 will find compelling comparisons and contrasts in the struggles of Luke and his classmates to advance into the wider world while retaining their cultural identity.--Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, November Issue --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Debby Dahl Edwardson grew up in Minnesota, where she spent summers at her family cabin on an island in the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. She earned a BA from Colorado College, attended Nansenskolen in Norway, and has lived for over thirty years in Barrow, the northernmost community in Alaska. She earned an MFA from Vermont College in 2005. Debby and her husband George have seven children. Her picture book, *Whale Snow* (Charlesbridge, 2003), was named to the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society and the CBC/NSST lists and was named Best Picture Book by IPPY. Her first novel, *Blessing's Bead* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) was selected by the Junior Library Guild and named to the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society, ALA/YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, and Booklist's Top 10 First Novels for Youth lists. Her novel, *My Name is Not Easy*, is a 2011 National Book Award Finalist.

The most powerful stories have qualities that are unique and universal. Debby Dahl Edwardson's *MY NAME IS NOT EASY* is such a story. In some ways, it is a classic boarding school story, and in others it is uniquely Alaskan. Edwardson draws characters from distinct backgrounds and cultures and throws them together in a strict Catholic boarding school where they clash and bond and grow together. There is heartbreaking loss, there is new love, and there is a growing understanding of the importance of standing up for what you believe in and the power of civil disobedience. Edwardson's lyrical prose draws the reader in to the landscape and culture of northern Alaska, a world that is foreign to most of us. Yet she does it in a way that is not preachy or didactic. She evokes a world that is in transition yet holding on to and respecting its traditions. The characters through whom she tells this tale are richly drawn, and their voices are strong. Their pain is real, as is their joy. In the end, I breathed a sigh of relief, but I also felt a strong sense of loss. I didn't want to leave this place

and these lives. I wanted to know what happened next. But, as the best writers do, Edwardson has left that to the reader to ponder and to understand. MY NAME IS NOT EASY is a special book by a talented writer who provides a window into a world so different from my own, and yet not so different after all.

This book is about how the Native American, and Eskimo children were schooled in the United States. In order to comply with national policy, they flew these young children down to a state in the lower 48. The story is told by a young boy who was called Luke because no white person could say his name. His parents were confused when their youngest child was not quite 5 years old, but had to be in school when he was five, so they sent him. When the school discovered that he was not five, they simply gave him away to some family and his real family never heard from him again. The schooling was done in a Catholic School so all the children had to learn to be Catholic Christians; their own traditions were debunked and discouraged. They were educated, but in such an institutional atmosphere, the adults never realized they were teaching two races of children American Indians and Eskimos, they just all looked alike to the staff members. It is at once a fascinating story of one young boy, and at the same time a sobering look at what our government considers education and how it was to be administered.

My Name Is Not Easy by Debby Dahl Edwardson is based on true events that happened to Eskimo and Indian children in Alaska about half a century ago, many of whom were sent to boarding schools. The book follows three brothers (based on the author's husband and his two younger brothers) and about half a dozen others through the first half of the 1960s. Parts were interesting, parts were heartbreaking, parts were shocking. It is well written and captures the thoughts and feelings of the children quite well.

It pulled me right in and held me close the entire read. It broke my heart a few times and made a permanent shift in my uninformed impressions about Alaska. I never once doubted the genuineness of the story or the characters. I appreciated the walk along side these kids through this experience at this time. Edwardson's storytelling skills are exquisite and there are passages of writing that made me draw a breath.

Although I've visited Alaska as a tourist, I have no idea how it would feel to be a native, accustomed to living a "traditional" lifestyle", depending on the land and ocean and ones' extended family, then

being suddenly transported to a white world of Catholic discipline, all for the sake of "education". This book captured the strong need for family, both for emotional and for physical survival. I came away wondering if this form of "education" is really worth disrupting the family. It left me with mixed feelings, but with a glimmer of understanding of how it feels to be a minority in a foreign world.

This historical fiction story tells about a Inupiaq boy named Luke who was sent with his brothers to a Catholic boarding school far from his home in the north of Alaska. It records the things that happened to these Native kids when they were forced to leave home for their educations. Almost immediately the youngest brother Isaac who is only six is taken from the others and sent away to be adopted by a family in Texas. Luke and Bunna, and even their families, have nothing to say about it. This story talks about the mostly well-meaning volunteers who educated the kids and tried to make them into good Christians. It talks about the rivalry between the Eskimos and the Indians that exists in the school and the white staff who can't tell the Indians and the Eskimos apart. The story also tells about a white girl named Chickie who was at the school too. Her father was a storekeeper in a remote village. Chickie identifies with the Eskimo kids she grew up with. The story is filled with kids like her and with orphans. They all band together and form friendships. I loved the language of this story told from a variety of viewpoints - Luke's, Chickie's, Sonny's who is the Indian son of a fatherless family who has lots of responsibility for his younger siblings, Amiq's who is the Eskimo son of a father who drinks, Donna who is an Indian girl who was orphaned and raised until boarding school by another missionary nun. We see a number of events through their eyes. We see the army testing the kids with a radioactive drink to see why they are able to survive above the arctic circle. We see the reaction to the assassination of the first Roman Catholic president. We see the protests about proposed nuclear explosions above the Arctic Circle and we see protests about hunting laws. This would be a good story to read with kids to talk about history. The author tells us that most of the events really happened to various Native kids at government and private boarding schools. Luke is based on her own husband's story.

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