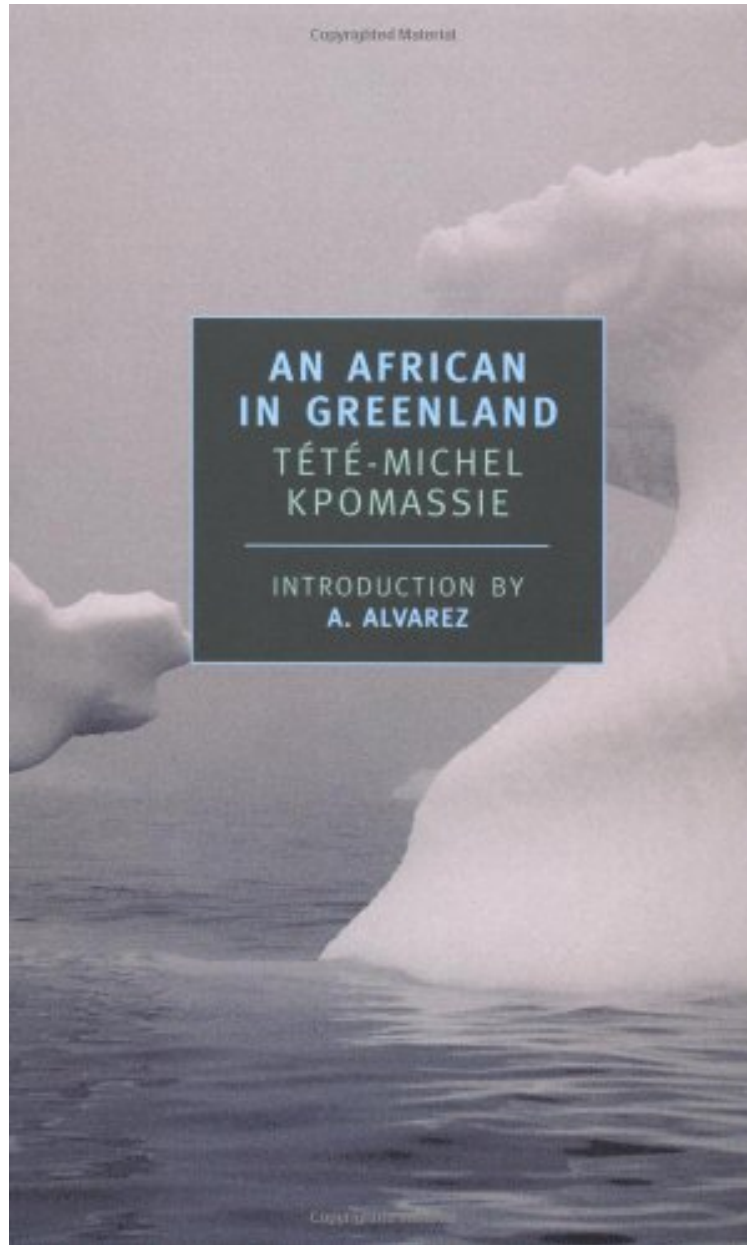


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## An African in Greenland (New York Review Books Classics)

*Tete-Michel Kpomassie, James Kirkup, A. Alvarez*  
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**Tete-Michel Kpomassie, James Kirkup, A. Alvarez : An African in Greenland (New York Review Books Classics)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised An African in Greenland (New York Review Books Classics):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. As soon as they saw me, all talking stopped. So intense was the silence, you could have heard a gnat in flight. By Mary Whipple Many obvious ironies occur as Tete-Michel Kpomassie, a young man from Togo in West Africa, makes a journey of discovery to Greenland. For the first sixty pages, the author describes life in Togo in lively detail and his decision to go to Greenland, a country as far, culturally, from Togo as it is possible to get. Over the course of ten years, he travels through Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Mauritania, before arriving in Marseille, Paris, Bonn, and eventually Copenhagen. During this time, he reads constantly, learning about life in other parts of the world, becoming fluent in German and French, and sensitively observing the differences between his culture and those of the other countries in Africa and Europe. By the time he gets a visa for Greenland, he is twenty-six, a highly skilled anthropologist, having learned what he needs to know through his own unconventional daily life. In June, sometime in the mid-1960s, he leaves at last for Greenland, ill-equipped but full of enthusiasm, trusting in his ability to make his way in that country and to become part of the Eskimo culture there. Leaving in a cargo boat with eight other passengers, he enjoys the long days of the midnight sun, which are then lead to ice floes and icebergs as he approaches Cape Farewell, the southernmost tip of Greenland. His arrival in Kakortoq is as exciting for the inhabitants as it is for Kpomassie: So intense was the silence, you could have heard a gnat in flight. The local inhabitants are universally hospitable, providing a place for him to stay and sharing meals and drink. Their children are allowed to do what they want, with little discipline. Though people work for most of the day when there is sunlight, they get tanked up early at night and celebrate all occasions, with a whole month dedicated to celebrating Christmas. The Inuit willingly provide him with the fur clothing he needs in the winter, and the women in the families with whom he stays make him the specially sized boots and garments that he needs. With a wonderful eye for the telling detail, Kpomassie observes the differences between the world in which he grew up, the world in which he has lived in Europe, and the world of Greenland. He becomes real, a stand-in for the reader who lives through his journey vicariously. The people he meets not only represent their culture but emerge as individuals through their interactions with him. Despite language differences, he is able to communicate and share their lives, and because of his honesty and his curiosity about their culture, he makes many friends. His eventual departure from Greenland is bittersweet, inspired by his duty to help the youth of Africa to open their minds to the outside world. His return to Europe and his later life as a citizen of the world, are testimony to his sense of adventure and his commitment to looking beyond the local to the universal.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. He is conscious that he represents a formerly colonized people visiting another and does a good job of refuting stereotypes. By Charles S. Brunger Michel Kpomassie writes an interesting biography about growing up in a family that worships pythons in Anecho, Togo and then getting the dream of exploring the Arctic in the mid-twentieth century. While he never reaches the North Pole, his friendships with the Inuit peoples of Greenland draw out similarities and differences with his African heritage. He is conscious that he represents a formerly colonized people visiting another and does a good job of refuting stereotypes. Through his experience, this self-educated man earned a French university degree in anthropology and became a noted lecturer. His biography has been reprinted to celebrate a half century since his arrival in Greenland.

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Worthwhile. By Reader in Tokyo This book was published in 1981 and centers on the author's adventures around 1966-67 in Greenland, the ice-covered island the size of Europe with a tiny population scattered along the coast. Born in French Togoland in West Africa, Kpomassie developed a passionate interest in Greenland after reading about it as a teenager. He left home shortly afterward in 1958 and, having little money, spent eight years working his way through Ghana, Senegal, France, Germany and Denmark before finally boarding a ship for his ultimate destination. It appears he was the first black African to visit Greenland, and his descriptions of his reception on arrival there are among the book's highlights. Landing near the island's southwestern tip, he traveled slowly up the western coast, staying for long periods of time with friendly families who kindly took him in. He'd hoped to reach the town of Thule in the northwest, but made it only two-thirds of the way before deciding to return home to share his experiences with his countrymen. Though he never reached his final destination or got to live in an igloo like he'd planned, he enjoyed many other experiences such as driving a dogsled, seeing icebergs up close and fishing on the ice. His descriptions of people and landscapes were impressive, bleak though they were at times. There were many scenes of poverty, squalor, boredom and heavy drinking among the locals. On the other hand, nearly everyone was very open and sharing with him. The writer was a good observer and often compared local practices with those of his own culture to find differences and similarities. He was interested especially in how children were indulged, how the adults got along with each other, treatment of the elderly, beliefs and rituals concerning death, prohibitions on killing certain animals, and so on. Descriptions of some of the people he met were memorable, as were those of things like riding a dogsled, the local diet, the packs of half-starved dogs running around the villages, the absence of trees, the extreme cold and the polar night. One night, he was astonished to see the aurora borealis for the first time, though the locals were so used to it they didn't bother to look outside. Most admirable to me were the author's good sense, quiet humor and ability to adapt to each new experience. How can you not admire someone who traveled to such a different place and embraced it? And for the most part, the local Inuit people embraced him. A lesson reinforced by this book was that despite all the cultural and language differences, people are people, and they can find ways to relate so long as they keep an open mind. A sample of his writing from

late in the book, after he planned to leave: "Now that I had been sharing these people's lives for sixteen months, their food no longer disgusted me, and I thought nothing of eating a breakfast of seal fat and dried intestines every morning . . ." "But we'd be glad to have you with us always!" old Mattaaq kept telling me. "We know you. Do you want for anything here? We have everything a man needs--seals and fish in the sea beyond counting. You know that, because you hunt and fish with my sons . . . But I understand you very well. After so many years away from them, you don't know what's become of your own folk, and you want to go back and see them, don't you?" "He may have been right. Do people ever know their true reason for embarking on a long journey? So many causes, motives and impulses intertwine to form the semblance of a reason." As a parting gift, the author's given a handmade necklace made from the tooth and claw of a polar bear. He writes, "My own grandfather would have made the same gesture with the same intention, using the trophies of a leopard; but he would have chosen a remote spot and a twilight hour, spoken arcane words, and enlisted all those minute preliminaries and accessories which, by swathing this simple act in mystery, would have given it increased significance. But here, in the land of the great cold, the daily ritual was stripped of that display. Here life was hard, and the pursuit of food more urgent than in the tropics." "If there was anything I missed in this book, it was more description by the author of his travels' effect on his own emotions and thinking. He described actions, beliefs and other people well, but wasn't really that introspective. Though the author returned initially to Togo, eventually he went back to France, took French citizenship and lives there. Judging from this book, his perceptions of what it's like to live in France between cultures would surely be of interest. Unfortunately for those who read only English, it appears that nothing else he's written has been translated from the French.

Tt-Michel Kpomassie was a teenager in Togo when he discovered a book about Greenland and knew that he must go there. Working his way north over nearly a decade, Kpomassie finally arrived in the country of his dreams. This brilliantly observed and superbly entertaining record of his adventures among the Inuit is a testament both to the wonderful strangeness of the human species and to the surprising sympathies that bind us all.

Language Notes  
Text: English, French (translation)  
About the Author  
Born in Togo, Kpomassie subsequently left his native Africa and traveled to the north of Greenland in a journey that lasted ten years. An African in Greenland, an autobiography that chronicles his journey, was awarded the Prix Littéraire Francophone International in 1981, and its English translation was one of The New York Times Notable Books of the Year in 1983. Kpomassie has written numerous articles and short stories for French publications.  
Al Alvarez is the author of Risky Business, a selection of essays, many of which first appeared in The New York Times.  
James Kirkup (1918-2009) was a prolific English poet, translator and travel writer. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1962.