

The Shift from Feasthouse to Book

Christie Harris

Living in a rich environment and invigorating climate, Natives of the Northwest Coast were wealthy, energetic people who could devote their mild winters to lavish Potlatch feasts where, while claims were being legally validated, a chief could show his wealth and importance in a display that turned the Potlatch into a Festival of the Arts.

Not surprisingly, they produced one of the world's great art styles and, I think, one of its great oral literatures. Their stories were as complex and sophisticated as their art, and as hard for the alien to understand — a challenge to a modern writer.

Before the modern writer can touch the tales, it's necessary that he/she become familiar not only with the natural hazards of their setting, but also with the unique culture that inspired them. For these myths and legends do not try to account for the vagaries of Nature so much as they deal with the human condition in a rank-conscious, matrilineal, hunting and food-gathering society.

By lucky chance, I lived in that area for several years. I went out on the sea frequently, attended Native ceremonies and made Indian friends who were generous about helping me to understand both the culture and the stories. Also, I had permission to do extensive research in excellent private libraries.

Since the Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit peoples had no written language and to a great extent turned their backs on their own culture after the coming of the white man, it was fortunate that several museums sent expeditions to the Northwest Coast around the turn of the century. Each included an ethnologist who sought out the storytellers and, with the assistance of an interpreter, collected many versions of the important myths and legends, tales that might otherwise have been lost. These old collections are my treasured sources. And, sometimes, my despair.

When I started rewriting them for modern readers, I didn't know there were two schools of thought. One holds that every word is sacred as it stands in the collections. The other maintains that the writer must turn the collected story into *literature*, uninhibited by the demands of authenticity.

I find both a little startling. My own instinct and experience dictated that I move to a middle ground. And I still think this is the right approach.

As they stand in the museums' Reports, the stories are not only hard to understand; they lack life and passion and fun. And to me that is a far remove from the tales presented at a Potlatch, where a talented storyteller used his voice and his gestures to add these enlivening qualities, and where a responsive audience entered emotionally into the telling.

This was an audience that understood the code the characters lived by. It didn't have to be told how deep and cold that sea was, or how impenetrable and spirit-haunted those forests were. But all this information has to be built in for the reader to whom this is basically a foreign scene. It was an audience that had lots of time for repetitions that might bore a modern reader.

Too, as taken down through an interpreter, the text lacks the eloquence that I *know* was in the original presentation. My appreciation of Native artistic talent prevents me from regarding the words in the museum collections as sacred. I *know* that's not what the stories were like in the old feasthouses. I have to add the grace that was there in the first place.

Another thing that frees me from rigid adherence to the text is the fact that every important story changed a little as it moved through the tribes. Many versions were picked up. So which version of the Salmon Prince do I use? None, exactly as it stands. Only when I have studied all the versions, defined the basic abstract of the story, and selected elements from the various versions, can I come up with a story that is true to the intent of the story, true to the motives of the people, yet still an engrossing tale for modern young people. After all, folklore *is* a changing thing.

But there are basics that must never change. While Old World folklore tends to feature the struggle of Good vs. Evil, Light vs. Dark, this is not so in the Northwest Coast legends. In them, there are mighty forces out there in the world, but all have potential for Good OR Evil, depending on what the character does. And this basic mind set must come through.

Another basic in the Indian tales is spirituality. Nature spirits, narnauks, ghosts . . . all were part of these people's *reality*. They must be part of my reality, too, as I write. Fortunately for my conviction while I'm working on my books, science is tending to validate this spirituality.

For instance, believing that every tree had a spirit self as well as a physical self, a Haida needing to cut down a tree for a totem pole first went to the tree, explained his need, apologized for his deed and thanked the tree spirit for its gift of wood. "Superstitious nonsense!" according to the white man. But now! Now isn't everybody talking to a tree? Or at least to a house plant because an expert on the lie-detector discovered (to his amazement) that, when wired to a polygraph, a plant revealed the same reaction to threats as did a human being. Further research tends to confirm the old Native belief that plants were sentient beings. And these findings add a whole new dimension to my retelling of the stories.

Always, it's the *story* that's important. The pattern must be satisfying to modern readers while still remaining true to its origins. The motives of the characters must be revealed, motives true to the old culture. Necessary information must be slipped in so unobtrusively that it doesn't stop the flow of events.

For my first collection, *Once upon a totem*, my editor, Jean Karl of Atheneum, suggested that I write a brief introduction to each story. This I have continued to do, making every effort to have the introduction so graphic and spirited that children will want to read the story that follows.

The shift from Feasthouse to Book is truly a challenging operation.

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