On the Gitskan Indians of B.C.

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Sky Man on the Totem Pole?, Christie Harris. Illust. Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1975. 167 pp. $7.95 cloth.

Visitors Who Never Left, Kenneth Harris. U.B.C. Press, 1974. 139 pp. cloth.

Interest in the culture and legends of the Gitskan Indians has been fostered in recent years by the revival of native art, crafts, and dancing at Ksan, near Hazleton in northern British Columbia. Visitors intrigued by the displays at Ksan now have two new sources of reading on the Gitskan legends--both recently published books by B.C. authors named Harris. Each presents legends about the divine origins of the tribe and its crests, the promised land of Damelahamid or Temlaham, and the vital relationships between men and animals. The resemblances between Kenneth Harris's *Visitors Who Never Left* and Christie Harris's *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* cannot, however, be pressed much further.

Kenneth Harris, a Gitskan chief, has compiled and translated a number of the legends of his people; his book is a fascinating and beautiful one, of considerable anthropological significance, but it has not been designed specifically for children and many adults will probably find it unsuitable for them. Christie Harris, on the other hand, has made a version of the legends specifically aimed at children, as were her notable retellings of other Indian legends in *Once Upon A Totem* and *Once More Upon A Totem.* Her most recent book attempts, however, not just an adaptation of the Gitskan legends, but to combine them with a science fiction plot about travellers from outer space, an ecological "message", and speculations derived from *Chariots of the Gods* and *The Secret Life of Plants.* While both of the Harrises' books emphasize the traditional Indian reverence for nature and the spirit life believed to be inherent in it, Kenneth Harris leaves the legends to speak for themselves on this subject, while Christie Harris provides a rationalization in terms of modern scientific and pseudo-scientific experimentation.

The text of *Visitors Who Never Left* originated in tapes recorded in 1948 by Kenneth Harris's uncle, Chief Arthur McDames, and was translated here by Kenneth Harris and his mother Irene, who first heard the stories told before the turn of the century. Kenneth Harris himself holds the title Hagbegwatku, whose origin is explained in one of the legends, and describes himself in his Foreword as "the last source of such information"; he has supplied brief introductory notes to the

stories, stressing their didactic intent. Collaborating in the publication of the book, Frances Robinson, of the University of British Columbia, contributed a scholarly introduction to the Gitskan people and their legends, analogues to other sources, and some fine photographs of the Hazleton area. Hazelton in the legends is in the fertile promised land of Damelahamid, and the legends are concerned with the people who settled there. These first ancestors had a half-divine, half-human origin, and several of the later legends are also concerned with interaction between human beings and sky divinities.

An overriding theme of this collection, however, as of so much Indian mythology, is that of respect for animal life. The first settlers are severely punished for playing with a football made from the inflated stomach of a bear: "it is forbidden by our people to mock any part of the animal kingdom. We take what we have to eat and we do not waste" (32). Later, most of the young men of the tribe are slain by an earthquake to avenge their needless slaughter of mountain goats.

The many youthful protagonists, the prominent role of animals and the theme of respect for nature in the Kenneth Harris stories might seem to place them in the mainstream of children's literature, as might the clarity and brevity with which they are told. But these Indian legends have not been adapted or bowdlerized an any way, and therefore, like the myths of all races, also treat subjects which we tend to consider unsuitable for children--excretion, menstruation and other "improper" bodily functions, as well as incest, and lurid details of punishments and deaths. Of course, with the probable exception of incest, children are often quite interested in these subjects and most would respond without our prudery to the frank treatment of them in these legends. Interestingly enough, the one tale about which Kenneth Harris comments with reference to children is an incest story. His note to "The Origin of the Thunderbird" observes that "Every story that the Indians hand down by word to their children is usually expressed in a form that would be attractive to them to understand. In the olden days, the punishment for incest was death"(75). All the same, the average Canadian parent or classroom teacher will probably shy away from the themes and details of a number of the legends in *Visitors Who Never Left.*

The oral tale-telling style with its frequent repetition--"They found that Damelahamid was no longer on the shores of the big ocean. They found that the ocean was no longer at the doorsteps of Damelahamid"(56)-- has a beautiful rhythmic quality which would appeal to the younger child when read aloud, but it is the older child with some already-awakened interest in Indian folk-lore who is most likely to appreciate this book. Such a child might be encouraged to discover, select from, and delight in it on his own.

Sky Man on the Totem Pole? has some fine moments in it, and could almost be recommended on the basis of its illustrations alone, but--as my summary of the plot at the opening of this review might suggest--Christie Harris attempts too many disparate tasks. Ultimately *Sky Man* falls apart from lack of internal unity or sense of development. The heart of the book, and its real strength, is its retelling of the legends of Kenneth Harris's people of Temlaham; the adaptation of such legends into exciting and appealing stories for children is Mrs. Harris's

forte. A comparison of her version of the revenge of the mountain goats with the version in *Visitors Who Never Left* will show how she, by personalizing the young hunter through his family relationships and conflict with his hunting chief, makes the story more readily accessible to children. Unfortunately, she does not restrict herself simply to adaptation.

The chief weakness of *Sky Man* is the didacticism which imposes a kind of superficial unity on the disparate elements of the book, but which is obtrusive, often shrill, and remains stated rather than felt. Didacticism is certainly not alien to fantasy--George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis are two notable practitioners of both--but to avoid stifling the fantasy it must remain implicit, must be at the heart of the author's vision, rather than a message baldly stated by the author, as it tends to be in *Sky Man*. Christie Harris takes up in this book the idea which she elaborated, again not altogether successfully, in *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild*: plants have a sensitivity and consciousness which the Indians expressed through the idea of their individual spirits and which modern technological society must come to realize and respect. Some statement of this theme keeps popping into the *Sky Man* stories like King Charles' Head into Mr. Dick's conversation.

To develop her theme, Mrs. Harris has two basic plots running parallel to each other. The first traces the largely legendary history of a tribe of north-west coast Indians in their search for Temlaham and their life there. The second plot, rather thinly sketched, concerns the planet Tlu, where a super-rational, technological civilization is doomed by its refusal to recognize the necessity of communicating sympathetically with plants in order to make them grow. The two plots are brought together by the visits of various Tlu-men in their space ships to Temlaham, where they use technological gadgetry to produce many of the miraculous events and cataclysmic punishments recorded in the Indian legends. The book also promulgates, briefly, yet another theory--Velikovskian speculation "that cosmic accidents were a worldwide source of myth" (166).

Mrs. Harris has a good feeling for her readership, and she is not wrong in assuming that modern children will be interested in an interpretation of Indian legends which accounts for their supernatural elements by reference to visitors from outer space. But such an interpretation does not of itself create a good fantasy, nor does it ultimately do justice to the mythology which it interprets. The basic assumption of *Sky Man* is that the legends gain in significance and validity if they can be seen as in some sense scientifically "true", if they refer to events which once literally happened. The dedication of the book is "To everyone who suspects that legends are fanciful records of history--recountings of actual events that were often misunderstood at the time." That a legend-teller of Christie Harris's reputation should espouse such a simplistic view of myth, apparently ignoring its symbolic, psychological and spiritual basis, is surprising. Ironically, this assumption that legends are justified by receiving a rational, historical explanation places her in the camp of her own Tlu-men, who do not think that a belief has any value unless it can be scientifically demonstrated to be true.

The story of Tlu might have been developed into a good science fiction novel on its own; science fiction is traditionally hospitable to speculation and messages of warning about human behaviour. But juxtaposed to the Temlaham legends and offered as an explanation of them, it is thin and tawdry. The process by which the Tlu-men project images on the rocks in order to lure the wasteful goat-hunters to the mountains is confusing, unconvincing, and adds nothing at all to the original legend. If one must have a rational explanation for the story, it is not difficult to think of a more plausible one than this. One might question, too, in a book directed at children, the emphasis placed on the theories of *Chariots of the Gods* and *The Secret Life of Plants:* these theories have not, on the whole, been accepted by reputable scientists, but the manner in which they are presented in *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* belies the question mark at the end of its title. One article in *Harper's Magazine* does not establish experiments as fact, as one of Mrs. Harris's heroes is made to assume. He justly comments about the myths of his people that "there is truth in a dream that will not die" (165), but must this be only a literal, historical and "scientific" truth?

In structure and style, as well, *Sky Man* is seriously flawed. The book closes with the Indian boy, Billy Charlie, discovering that modern science is confirming many of his tribe's old beliefs.

> Suddenly his eyes widened.
> "Woo-wow!" he burst out. "What if --?"
> What if the Man-from-the-Sky had been a SPACEMAN?(165)

Whatever one may think of the concept, this is not a felicitous way of expressing it and concluding the novel. Similarly, a potentially beautiful vision of the legendary Temlaham is spoilt by theorizing about the Findhorn gardeners and an odd reference to everyone making the desert bloom with forty-pound cabbages.

The figure of Billy Charlie, a modern Indian boy who comes to appreciate the traditions of his people, might have been used more effectively to integrate the book: why not begin with Billy as well, instead of with the thoughts and feelings of a boy who shortly drowns and is forgotten? Mrs. Harris attempts to impose continuity on her material by the reiteration of her message, but the constant changes of protagonist, both among the Indians and among the Tlu-men, are distracting. The book needs a character, and not just an idea, at its centre. Skawah, although she reappears several times in the course of the book, is never sufficiently developed as a character to serve the purpose, and remains a *dea ex machina.*

Sky Man contains several potentially good books within it, but fails to integrate this material into a convincing whole. Interestingly enough, its illustrator, Douglas Tait, succeeded in his roughly similar task. His drawings for the book include landscapes, animals, space-men, spirit visions, realistically-drawn figures, a scientific diagram and stylized Indian crests. This remarkable variety is unified by a delicacy of handling which gives every subject--realistic or visionary--a mysterious and suggestive quality. If the story itself had made its hypotheses more subtly and delicately, and found some means to blend its components

into an artistic whole, it would be both more charming in its fantasy and more convincing in its theories.

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A Poor Year for Beavers

JOSEPH GOLD

Sharptooth: The Year of the Beaver, David Allenby Smith. Peter Martin Associates, Toronto, 1974. 54 pp. $6.95 cloth.

In spite of charges of evasion, laziness and cowardice, I went ahead with my scheme to have my three children review this book for me. True to the modes of modern youth, their writing was brief, hasty and not deeply thought-out, but it taught me to treat this book more seriously than my own reading of it had inclined me to do.

The eleven-year-old boy wrote that while he thought the book "well-written," it "is probably more understandable to adults." Does this mean that his natural deference leads him to believe that what is incomprehensible is well-written? He goes on to say the book "makes one aware of the beavers [sic] situation with man and nature." Clearly this factually-based narrative speaks to the new ecological sensitivity of children.

The fourteen-year-old girl noticed that the story is not "fictionalized" as indicated by the title, "the beaver," not "a beaver." She says it is "isolated from sentiment and feeling." She says it is not a child's book "for few children would be very, if at all interested in it! The illustrations are very straightforward as is the book itself." Clearly this second opinion confirms the book's appeal to mature tastes and its documentary syle, though this bothers her more than it does her younger brother.

The sixteen-year-old liked it more than the others. The idea of the beaver as hero and man as the enemy appealed to her. She found it "a well-related story about survival and love and growing-up." She thought it had a "powerful impact--a very distinct punch."

David Allenby Smith was a documentary film maker and this book shows all the marks of the trade. It is not a novel, not really even a story, though it forms itself around the simplest possible narrative structure of the beaver's life-cycle. As documentary it benefits from the latest information on beaver instinct and goes out of its way to emphasize that