Stories and Stlalakums: Christie Harris and the Supernatural World

SUSAN WOOD

Christie Harris, perhaps Canada's best-known writer for children, established her reputation with realistic books – such historical accounts of pioneer life as her first book, *Cariboo Trail* (1957), and such "family books" based on her children's careers as *You Have to Draw the Line Somewhere* (1964), *Confessions of a Toe-Hanger* (1967) and *Let X Be Excitement* (1969). Yet she has won her international reputation largely by retelling the legends and tales of the Pacific Coast Indians, recreating a world of *narnauks* and *stlalakum*-spirits, in which princesses marry bear chiefs and youths visit the realm of the Sun. *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* (1976), *Mouse Woman and the Mischief-Makers* (1977) and *Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads* (1979) have been published in Toronto, New York and London; the second of these was named an ALA Notable Book. Not only has Harris introduced a wide audience to Indian lore through these books and her award-winning work of historical fiction, *Raven's Cry* (1966), she has also extended readers' understanding of "fantasy." In the collections of legends, which began with *Once Upon a Totem* (1963) and *Once More Upon a Totem* (1973), and in the contemporary books which draw on Indian lore – *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* (1972), *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* (1975) and *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* (1978) – her unique contribution rests on presenting, not "fantasy" in the traditional sense, but the spiritual reality of another culture, observed with increasing sensitivity.

Sheila Egoff argues, in *The Republic of Childhood*, that "there is no important body of Canadian fantasy in the traditional sense" – that is, for example, in the sense described by Tolkien in "On Fairy Tales," in which he speaks of the fantasist as a sub-creator, making a new secondary world.[1] Speaking specifically of Catherine Anthony Clarke, Christie Harris, and *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild*, Egoff comments that: "Canadian fantasy, it appears, offers only a slight impingement of a fantasy world upon the real one; it eschews the creation of a new and different world, with its own compelling force and internal consistency."[2] Yet as J. Kieran Kealy points out in "The Flame-Lighter Woman," Clarke in her novels is not presenting an inferior version of traditional fantasy, but rather is redefining the genre, to "produce a kind of fantasy which is rather different from that found in the European tradition."[3]

Harris, too, in her best work, does not merely draw on Indian motifs to provide exotic details or underscore ecological concerns. Rather she attempts to recreate, for a modern white reader, the world-view of the Pacific Coast Indians, for whom that "tension between the real and the fantastic," which Egoff identifies as "one of the hallmarks of fantasy," simply did not exist.[4] For example, as Diamond Jenness points out in *The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian*, the Coast Salish, in common with other tribes, believed in a supreme diety, One Who Dwells Above, "always watching [humans] from his home in the sky." The Salish believed that salmon, like humans, had souls; their creation myth tells how their hero Swaneset married a salmon woman, who taught the people how to catch her relatives – with appropriate rituals to ensure that the souls of the salmon would return to inhabit new bodies. Like humans, "Animals and plants possess shadows, vitality or thought, and special talents and powers," though they lack souls. Humans can establish contact with the "vitality" or spirit (*smistiux*) of animals, plants, rocks, water, wind and sun. In Jenness' words,

> Every living creature in man's neighbourhood emanates its power, which travels about and frequently attaches itself to the vitality of a human being . . . . Each creature has its special power that it can bestow . . . . [Moreover,] He Who Dwells Above . . . also ordained that many creatures should never be visible to mortal eyes. They live in mystic realms at varying distances from man, who knows of them through visions only, when his vitality leaves his body and travels to their homes. It is from these distant, invisible creatures, not from the common creatures around about, that man obtains really extraordinary power – power, for example, to cure diseases.[5]

Elsewhere, Jenness comments that myths, rituals and beliefs he records indicate how devout Indians "diligently strove to make their lives conform to the regulations supposedly laid down for them by Him Who Dwells Above, and by the teeming world of spirit powers that He Who Dwells Above had brought into being for man's welfare."[6]

Thus, in the Indian world-view, humans share the natural world with the physical presences, and the spiritual essences, of every other created thing. Moreover, the supernatural world is closely connected to the natural world. Some of Harris' stories depict shamans leaving their bodies – as Condohahtgha in *Raven's Cry* does to achieve his vision of the future destruction of the Haida villages, and as shamans in the Mouse Woman tales do to find the whereabouts of princesses kidnapped by supernatural beings. Yaloa in "The Prince Who Was Taken Away by the Salmon" is taken in a strange canoe which "shone like a silver salmon" to the land of the Salmon People.[7] He returns by slipping through the "blue wall" in the horizon which "hid a strange opening and closing that allowed people to pass between the real world and the supernatural" (*OMUT*, p. 40). In "Mouse Woman and the Daughter of the Sun," Sun Cloud climbs a high mountain, then follows "A trail that seemed as bright and gossamer as a

rainbow, and almost as narrow" to the realm of the Sun.[8]

This close connection, rather than separation, between the "real" and "spiritual" or "supernatural" worlds is further stressed as actions in one world are shown clearly affecting life in the other. The Mouse Woman tales, and others, emphasize the need for balance and harmony between the worlds, and proper reverence on the part of humans for the spiritual being of the creatures who share the world. In "The Princess and the Bears," for example, hunters have offended the bears by wanton slaughter; a princess, Rh-pi-sunt, has also offended the spirits by her arrogant behaviour. Prince-of-Bears, "a supernatural being whose spirit self could animate either of two shapes: bear or human; or . . . dart around the world without any body," carries off the princess and, in his human form, fathers twin boys who are both human and bear cubs.[9] Finally, Rh-pi-sunt's youngest brother journeys to the supernatural world of the bears, in the mountains near the human village, to rescue her. Prince-of-Bears orders the boy to kill him, in his bear form; his spirit-self then takes on human shape, and he speaks to the humans, instructing them in the rituals appropriate to the killing of his people:

> "When the bear dies at your hand, he gives you food and fur," Prince-of-Bears reminded the boy. "And what do you give in return? . . . You give him the reverence that nourishes his spirit-self, so that it will come back to the mountain again, to nourish him again. The obligation of a gift is the great law that keeps all things equal in the world. This you must tell the people . . . And as a reminder, forever, you must show this to the people." He gave the boy a bone charm carved with the Prince-of-Bears Crest. "This is a new crest for you and for your descendants. A crest to remind them, forever, of their obligation to the bears who give them food and comfort." (*MWVP*, p. 65).

For the original tellers, this and similar tales like "The Prince Who Was Taken Away by the Salmon" were not ecological allegories or "primitive" explanations of nature, nor were they merely entertainment. They were living expressions of truth and of a cultural heritage. Harris' importance as a recreator of legends lies in her own growing sensitivity to the tales' spiritual element; her importance as a "fantasy" writer lies in her attempt to present this spiritual element in a white context.

Harris' own comments on the tales reveal the growth of her understanding. In her preface to "The Wild Woman of the Woods," one of the five tales collected in her first book of legends, *Once Upon a Totem*, she talks about the "frightening shadows" of the North Pacific rain forests, and their influence on Indian culture:

> In the long ago days, ignorance and imagination added even more terrors. Every Indian tribe knew of ogres and witches who lived deep in the forest . . . . But evil creatures were not the only supernatural beings Indians knew. Lacking science, the aborigines found fanciful reasons

for the mysteries of nature.[10]

Thus Harris appears to dismiss myth and legend, in modern Western fashion, as the product of ignorance, even while acknowledging the "rich artistic talents" of the people (*OUT*, p. ix). Thus she notes that Du'as, the hero of one story, "though unable to read or write . . . was a proud and cultured boy" (*OUT*, p. 3). Significantly, such comments are not present in the later retelling of the story in *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, while the spiritual elements of the story are highly emphasized. In *Once Upon a Totem*, too, she stresses similarities between Indian tales and white myths and legends, but only as superficial comparisons (they are all entertaining fantasies), not as indications, perhaps, of a common basis in spiritual or psychological truth. Thus in her preface she comments that:

> Often the heroes of these adventures seemed to have come, as they themselves had come, out of the ancient Old World; mythical heroes who, like themselves, had taken on the New World colors of salmon and cedar, sea otter and painted totem (*OUT*, p. ix).

Thus, introducing the first story, she compares totem images to knights' coats-of-arms. Introducing the last (which is, she emphasizes, not a myth but "an historical adventure, based firmly on actual happenings"), she says the heroine is "as real and romantic a figure as Bonnie Prince Charlie. Her son, Prince Hayis . . . was as wrongfully deprived of his rights as was Robin Hood living in Sherwood Forest, or as was Richard the Lion-Hearted" (*OUT*, p. 113).

Later volumes, however, omit references to "primitive" people; indeed, in her novels, Harris stresses that Indians possessed important knowledge which overly-rational whites lack. The comparisons to white myths and legends are also absent. Harris does, however, express a need to provide, not only translations, but "reworkings" of Indian material. In the Afterword to *Once More Upon a Totem*, she writes:

> Such tales need to be reworked for people of a different time, place and culture – for listeners who are not familiar with the region or its values. So the new storytellers have much to do.
>
> They must change the old text sufficiently to make it really come to life for people who do not know the region, the old culture, or the whys behind the action. Yet they must keep the new text deeply true to the old story (*OMUT*, p. 194).

Thus her vocabulary is one of princesses and heroes; her story lines are relatively smooth, without many of the puzzling or violent episodes found in the originals, or in retellings such as Patricia F. Mason's *Indian Tales of the Northwest,* with its accompanying Teacher's Manual giving anthropological background (from Vancouver's CommCept Publishing, 1976). Though the Indian belief emphasized the potential for good and evil in every creature, moral values in Harris' tales remain fairly clear – heroes are heroes and villains are villains, while, as in the fairy tale tradition, an

errant person may be reformed by suffering. Readers interested in the extent of Harris' reworkings, and the effect on the tales, can consult her sources, primarily Franz Boas' *Tsimsian Mythology* and John R. Swanton's *Haida Texts and Myths*; she provides a full list of background readings in an appendix to *Mouse Woman and the Mischief-Makers.*

Though Harris' style involves a reworking of her material, her approach to that material has changed, as her comments in *Once More Upon a Totem* make clear. Writers like herself, she comments,

> need a genuine familiarity with the Northwest Coast and its native people. They need years of sensitive contact with Indian homes and remote Indian villages to round out the research they can do in archives and in Northwest collection.
>
> They need illustrators as dedicated as themselves to depicting the culture authentically.
>
> Perhaps, most of all, they need readers with understanding hearts and lively imaginations (*OMUT*, pp. 194-95).

In an autobiographical essay for *Canadian Literature*, Harris comments that "*Once More Upon a Totem* has more spiritual depth than my earlier *Once Upon a Totem.*"[11] A comparison of similar stories, such as "The One-Horned Mountain Goat" from the first collection and "The Prince Who Was Taken Away by the Salmon People" from the second, reveal the changes in her approach. These stories both emphasize the need for balance between human and natural worlds, and particularly for the performance of rituals to honour the spirit of the fish or animal when it is killed, out of necessity for food, not wantonly to display skill or gain wealth. The earlier story, however, is presented primarily as a magic-animal fairytale, with ecological overtones, in which the hero is saved by an animal he has helped. In the latter story, the reality of the Salmon People both as humanoid spirit-beings and as fish is emphasized, as are the co-existence and mutual interaction of the human, natural and spirit worlds.

The Mouse Woman books continue this emphasis, though the spirit world's distance in time is also stressed. *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* begins:

> It was in the days of very long ago, when things were different.
>
> Then supernatural beings roamed the vast green wildernesses of the Northwest Coast. And people called them narnauks (*MWVP*, p. 3).

This formula is repeated several times, for example in the opening of "Mouse Woman and the Snee-nee-iq," significant again as a reworking of a similar tale, "The Wild Woman of the Woods" from *Once Upon a Totem.* In the earlier tale, the moral is stressed in a way satisfying to children. Bidal the heroine triumphs over a bullying elder girl, who is punished; and the "poor old ogre" is humanized into a non-mysterious being who "only wanted something pretty" and who ceases to be threatening when given

some shining ear ornaments (*OUT*, p. 85). In the second tale, the spiritu elements are emphasized through the role of Mouse Woman as the guardi of balance. She, not the kidnapped girl or the ogre, is the centre attention. Through her actions the child escapes, but only by transformir the threatening *narnauk* into a horde of mosquitoes, which torment her:

> The small had vanquished the big. And the big had turned into a very small. A girl who wanted too much had got more than she ever wanted – a horde of mosquitoes. The two who had been upsetting the order of the world had dealt with each other to bring back the order of the world (*MWMM*, p. 53).

Harris' understanding grew with her research into Indian life for *Raven Cry*. This account of the destruction of the Haida culture after the comir of the whites was inspired by the art of Haida carver Charles Edenshav Harris traced his line back to the Haida Eagle chiefs who bore the nam Edsina – and in the process discovered something beyond facts:

> By the time I had heard the family stories, and had followed clues through old ships' logs in the archives, I had become so immersed in that world that I began to think I was tuning in on an old Haida spirit. I'd run into something I just could not find out about. I'd go to bed worrying about it. And, again and again, I'd wake up knowing what had happened, just as if someone had told me. When I'd check out the idea, again and again it seemed to be what *must* have happened.[12]

Raven's Cry mocks white assumptions of superiority and "civilization, and sympathetically depicts the confusion and shame of a proud peop who were told by missionaries that their culture and deeply-held spiritu beliefs were inferior and wrong. The book ends, however, not with th death of Haida culture and of Charles Edenshaw who expressed it in ar but with resurrection and affirmation. Harris tells how Bill Reid, Charl Edenshaw's descendant who served as her consultant and illustrated th book, began to feel "a strange compulsion" to carve in the traditiona manner.[13] He learned the necessary skills; then, re-creating a Haida villag for the University of British Columbia, he felt the spiritual presence of hi great-grand-uncle and of Haida chieftainesses, ghosts whose memory h honoured with a secret traditional potlatch. The book ends with the hop that "a more enlightened generation" will appreciate both Haida art, an the culture which produced it (*RC*, p. 193).

Harris compares the shaman Condohahtgha's trance-vision in *Raven' Cry* to astral travelling, Indian reverence for life to modern ecologica concerns. She comments:

> It was *Raven's Cry* that first startled me into the thought that the old Indian notions are very much in tune with today, maybe even more in tune with tomorrow . . . .
>
> The natives had claimed that plants had a spirit self as well as a physical self. So, if they needed to cut down a tree, they talked to it, explaining, apologizing – a practice that was scoffed at as superstitious

nonsense. But now, isn't everybody talking to a tree? Aren't scientists wiring plants up to a polygraph and discovering that they can even read your mind?

There's even the odd scientist postulating an invisible world around us, a world of matter vibrating at such a high frequency that we can't tune in on it. But WHAT IF people living closer to nature, people with keener senses heightened by prayer and fasting, by hypnotic drums and dancing, actually were tuning in to ghosts and spirits who were really there?[14]

These connections and speculations form the basis of her fantasy-adventures: *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild, Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* and *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds.*

Secret in the Stlalakum Wild is the most successful of these books because it accepts and presents the spirit world as a reality, perceptible to whites if they will open themselves to it. The introductory chapter emphasizes that "there is something strange about the northwest wildernesses," something *stlalakum* – uncanny, unnatural, spiritual. Harris also introduces the book's ecological theme, as she stresses:

Insensitive men who crash through the fragile, living wilderness would never understand about stlalakums. So the Indians keep their silence.

But their silence is vibrant with understanding of the unnatural beings who still live in the natural world here, in these last hiding places. Here, in the few fortresses still standing against the onslaught of the arrogant Tamers of the Wild (*SSW*, p. 5).

In general, however, she allows her concerns to emerge naturally from the adventures of Morann Fenn, a believable young girl. As the third daughter in a family of four children, Morann tends to feel ignored and left out; specifically she is left behind when her older sisters and their young aunt Sarah go on an expedition to "Stlalakum Lake" on "Devil's Mountain" (Sumas Mountain in southern British Columbia). Following them, alone, Morann inadvertently eats some salal berries – and becomes the unwilling heir of a quest to save the Stlalakum Wild.

Through Morann, Harris establishes the reality of the spirit world. Morann is practical, unlike her little brother Gregory, an imaginative child with an invisible playmate. Initially she is terrified by the strangeness she perceives in nature. The "uncanny" silence of the woods which pushes her into panic flight, and the squirrel which appears to lead her to the lake, *could* be dismissed as subjective perceptions. After all, Morann has been listening to her sister Kath's notes on stlalakums, "*unnatural beings in the natural world. Beings?* . . . . Now she began to glimpse dark shapes out of the corner of her eye; though when she turned to look, they were not there" (*SSW*, p. 40). Yet when Morann sees the cloud plume of the Band of Invisibles, and hears spirit voices, her heart begins "thumping so loud it

would have wakened her if she'd been dreaming. So she *wasn't* dreaming' (*SSW*, p. 48). Her encounter with Siem (the name means "Respected One" and is the Coast Salish term for the head of an ancestral household), "a bundle of energy shaped like a miniature human" with chief's robes of iridescent mist, is presented as a real experience (*SSW*, p. 80). So is her out-of-body journey as the Band of Invisibles takes her *smistiux*, disembodied vitality, on a journey over the Stlalakum Wild to see how the sea serpent who followed the greedy white man has fouled the coast with an oil spill. Morann's terror is as real as her experiences. It is fear, not disbelief, which causes her to fail in the quest at first; overcoming this fear, she confronts the Seexqui, the two-headed water serpent of Stlalakum Lake, and is rewarded with a vision of "treasure". At this point Morann, like every creature in the world according to Indian belief, has the potential for either good or evil. She almost chooses to become one of the despoilers of the wild, seeking gold – and, realistically, dreaming of giving her family noisy power boats and trail bikes. Instead, however, she realizes that the real "treasure" is the beauty of the wilderness. Her reward is "spirit power":

> If love for a plot of barley could make it grow better, then love for living things was power, wasn't it? Like the sun's power. It was the power of your potential for good or evil. The power to make things grow, or to shrivel them (*SSW*, p. 184).

Though Harris' story has a contemporary message, it is rooted in the Indian lore which forms the background of the book, and is integrated with Morann's experience. Like any questor, she confronts her own fears and gains understanding – "treasure". Significantly, however, her adventure takes place *not* because she enters a fantasy otherworld, but because she gains increased awareness of *this* world. Harris underlines the reality of her stlalakum beings through Morann's friend Neil, who believes in her adventures because of his own interest in scientific experiments involving plant responses to human emotions: "Living cells . . . must send out signals; and the signals can go hundreds of miles, leaping over anything, flashing through anything" (*SSW*, p. 21). Neil's theory of "a cosmic communications network that animals – can tune in on" echoes and reinforces Morann's experiences with the spirit world (*SSW*, p. 69).

The use of scientific "explanations" is also central to *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, though here it becomes intrusive. The book is episodic, really a collection of stories relating the founding and downfall of Temlaham, the legendary "Promised Land" of the North Pacific coast, lost when its people, in their arrogance, failed in reverence for the natural and spiritual worlds. The retelling of "The One-Horned Mountain Goat," for example, emphasizes Du'as' reverence for life, and his vision of the spirit world. Yet this vision is presented as identical to the "scientifically"-observed radiant aura surrounding plants and humans, as observed by humanoid aliens from the planet Tlu – whose actions, it seems, are the "real" cause of such phenomena as Du'as' vision of the Goat Spirit, and the appearance of Thunderbird. Other Indian beliefs are shown to be "primitive"

misinterpretations of natural phenomena, such as the close passage of a comet. Either one accepts the spiritual elements of the Indians' world-view, *or* one "explains" it through some theory such as alien colonization of Earth. Either Skawah "really" married a Sky Man – or she "really" married a visiting Tluman, "complete with plastic clothes, ray gun, vapor screen, prefabricated houses and luminous paint," – frankly, a less compelling vision.[16] One cannot accept both "realities," even though Harris tries to juxtapose them. The Tlumen, she says, have destroyed their planet because their repression of emotion has caused all vegetation to die. In their "logical" contempt for "the primitive mind," they resemble contemporary whites (*SSW*, p. 15) Yet they are used both to emphasize the spiritual superiority of Indian life – and to dismiss its spiritual element by providing a "logical" and "scientific" explanation for it. The science fiction element is jarring, and undercuts the authority of Harris' message. Even the final scene, in which a contemporary Indian youth accepts the values of his ancestors, is granted a vision of Shawah who urges humans to look within themselves for spirit-power, and then equates this with the work of the Findhorn gardeners in Scotland, is weakened by "space age" and "spaceman" references.

In *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds*, Harris also reveals an ambivalent attitude towards her Indian material. Apparently acting on the advice of her editor at Atheneum – the highly-respected Jean Karl – she left references to the spirit world as speculation. The result is a conventional adventure story involving Lark Doberly (an imaginative thirteen year old), her younger brother Joe, various friends, stolen argillite carvings, accidents at sea, the history of Lucy Island – and just a hint of another world. As a child, Lark had an imaginary playmate, "misty and vanishing" but real to her.[17] As a teenager, overly tall and uninterested in sports, she is criticized by her mother for "escaping into a dream world" (*METW*, p. 29). Some experiences – an encounter with a visionary painter and a lighthouse keeper's attempts to communicate with sea gulls – start her wondering: "Why shouldn't there be nature spirits? Right now, though, I was sensible enough to trim my sails to the wind that was blowing" (*METW*, pp. 95-96). She represses her interest. Even her friend Andy is concerned with public opinion and only admits "reluctantly," to her alone, his interest in theories of "an invisible world of matter vibrating at such a high frequency that we can't tune in on it" (*METW*, p. 157). Hence Lark resolves to "stop escaping into myself . . . into my crazy imagination," though she also accepts the necessity of talking to her mother about her perceptions of "the Other World" (*METW*, p. 158). Thus Harris concludes by having Lark observe that: "Reality could be pretty exciting . . . But . . . What was reality?" (*METW*, p. 159). Morann's certainty, and the narrator's conviction in the Mouse Woman tales, are missing, and so the Indian material remains only a decoration for a regional adventure.

The contrast between *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* and *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild*, like that between *Once Upon a Totem* and the later

collections of tales, serves to emphasize Harris' gift as a re-creator of worldview in which spiritual, natural and human elements co-exist i harmony. Not a fantasy writer in the traditional sense, she does not give u sub-creations, invented worlds; her gift is to make us regard our own worl through Indians' eyes, and with, perhaps, something of their reverence.

NOTES

[1]Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood*, second edition (Toronto: Oxforc 1975), p. 69.

[2]Egoff, p. 73.

[3]J. Kieran Kealy, "The Flame-Lighter Woman," *Canadian Literature* 7 (Autumn 1978), p. 32.

[4]Egoff, p. 75.

[5]Diamond Jenness, *The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian* (Victoria: Britis Columbia Provincial Museum, 1955), pp. 35-37.

[6]Jenness, p. 75.

[7]Christie Harris, *Once More Upon a Totem* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1973), p. 23.

[8]Christie Harris, *Mouse Woman and the Mischief-Makers* (New York Atheneum, 1977), p. 101.

[9]Christie Harris, *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* (New York Atheneum, 1976), p. 31.

[10]Christie Harris, *Once Upon a Totem* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 59.

[11]Christie Harris, "In Tune With Tomorrow," *Canadian Literature* 78 (Fa 1978), p. 29.

[12]Harris, "In Tune," p. 28.

[13]Christie Harris, *Raven's Cry* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 189

[14]Harris, "In Tune," pp. 28-29.

[15]Christie Harris, *Secret in the Slalakum Wild* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1972), p. 3.

[16]Christie Harris, *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* (Toronto: McClelland an Stewart, 1975), p. 4.

[17]Christie Harris, *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* (Toronto: McClelland an Stewart, 1978), p. 11.

Susan Wood teaches courses in Canadian literatgure, children's literature, an science fiction at the University of British Columbia.