The major disappointment in this book is in the artwork. Th illustrations done by Mr. Tait reveal a skill and an attention to detail that i quite impressive, but the impact of all the drawings except one is negative In many instances the illustration is true neither to the text (a "beautiful' woman such as that illustrated in the "Killer Whale" story is unlikely t dazzle many eyes!) nor to the artistic traditions of the Pacific Coast tribes In spite of this aspect of the pictures, they do have a sort of horrifi fascination that will perhaps appeal to many children, and the final image of two Indian childen, has a haunting beauty that erases much of th ugliness and pain that the other illustrations depict.

Mrs. Harris is an established writer, with ten other volumes already to he credit. Her background in British Columbia, and her experiences witl children and with traditional lore have enabled her to weave many of he ideas into the fabric of her writing with a deftness that is often lacking i children's literature.

This book does not purport to be a definitive work of Canadia children's literature, but it is an appealing, interesting, and instructiv collection of stories from a mind that is obviously closely attuned both t the subject matter and to the audience.

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# Visions and Revisions

*LIONEL ADEY*

*Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds*, Christie Harris. Illus. Lou Crockett McClelland & Stewart, 1978. 175 pp. $8.95 hardcover.

At her mother's behest Lark Doberly, a gawky, introverted Victoria schoolgirl, of the kind that always drops the ball in team-games, takes a

sailing trip from Prince Rupert, her grandmother's home town. On that voyage Lark learns to accept her own intuitions. She also learns the true history of Lucy Island and helps trap an art-thief who has used that lonely spot as a cache for Indian argillite carvings stolen from Prince Rupert.

In this West Coast novel, Christie Harris beautifully etches the natural and mythological background but fails to weave together the three strands in her plot: the narrator-heroine's self-discovery, a crime and its detection, and an episode from British Columbian history. The story-teller is bedevilled by the historian, the psychologist by the anthropologist. Only as seascape-painter does Mrs. Harris completely succeed.

Yet the book opens promisingly enough, as a coastal ferry approaches British Columbia's northernmost fishing-port and its much-visited museum. The first few paragraphs catch perfectly the contrast between the two worlds of the North Pacific coast: the world of the "Great Whirlpool Maker" lurking beneath the stormy waters, of the "Wild Woman" waiting in the rainforest for children, of "ghosts" at the mountain-edge; and the world of sunlit waters, white wings and snow-peaks. In this contrast, the author symbolises the two possible worlds awaiting her heroine: a daylight world inhabited by Lark's mother, her brother Joe and her prospective stepfather Mr. Dennis, and a world of the imagination and the spirit inhabited by Winnie, a "weirdo" artist. It is the portrayal of Winnie that first provokes disbelief. A full-page illustration showing this artist, wearing size-twelve shoes and cutting absurd capers in the street, merely underlines the improbability of Lark's description:

> "She's dancing like a wood nymph," I mumbled . . . really awed to see a woman do that, right out in public . . . . That's what most people never seemed to understand. You could *look* like a flagpole and still *feel* like a wood nymph.

Not in a children's story, you can't!

Maybe adult readers given to fantasy could accept Winnie as a projection of the heroine's introvert-intuitive vein, and maybe child readers could accept Lark's irrational jealousy of her mother's suitor, or even the grandmother's stubborn trustfulness in refusing to lock her door despite owning now priceless argillite carvings. Maybe they could credit the conspiracy of well-meaning but uncomprehending adults who send a dreamy child to sea to make her "face up to reality." But credulity stumbles when Mrs. Harris fails to make her adult figure develop or inter-act. Neither mother nor grandmother bats an eyelid when a local Jeremiah croaks his warning of foul weather to come: Grandmother calmly lectures the company on a ship-wreck back in 1893 that gave rise to the legend of buried treasure on Lucy Island. Since the Jeremiah-figure has so little effect, why introduce him?

Of the major male characters, only the unfortunate Skipper behaves consistently enough to come to life. The art-thief Harry cleverly employs a

nondescript delivery-boy to steal art-wares from presumably unlocked houses, yet incredibly decides to cache them on the island inhabited by an alert family, rather than on a nearby uninhabited one. Again, he poses as an environmentalist to warn tourists off, yet advertises his presence by swamping small craft in the wash from his yellow power-boat.

Even with lifeless or improbable adults, a children's story could pass muster if only its child-characters lived. In her child-characters Mrs. Harris portrays uncertainty much better than self-assurance. Lark, clumsy and self-disparaging, compels sympathy when fending off giant auklets, blundering down their burrows or wondering whether she is fated to grow up into a "weirdo" like Winnie. Andy, the lighthouse-keeper's son who acts as her mentor, provokes a more complex response. He appears first as a bright, lonely boy instantly striking up a friendship with a girl willing to learn about a strange place. He comes unglued during Lark's second visit, and turns into an improbable compound of walking encyclopedia, prig chanting RCMP slogans, and youthful psycho-therapist reassuring Lark about her tallness and mental balance.

If the book ended with Lark's acceptance of her own nature, some of its loose ends might be forgotten. Unfortunately, the author tacks on a lengthy biography of a pioneer girl, given to Lark to read on her way home. If incorporated earlier, and treated more briefly, this historical narrative might have its place. It simply will not do to end a children's story with this undigested and unexplained chunk of history.

Indeed one's final judgment must be that *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* lacks coherence and artistic shape. Any adult, let alone any child, wants to know much that the book does not tell him: whether Grandmother's carvings were among those stolen, whether Harry the thief was caught, whether Lark's family resolved to accept her as she was, whether she planned to see lighthouse Andy when he came down to Victoria to school, and so on. Revision could have cleared up puzzles about Lucy the pioneer girl. Revision might also have eliminated surplus characters and highlighted the essentials of those minor figures that survived. It might have removed such minor irritations as Lark's habit of telling us that she "mumbled," "squealed" and so forth. Finally, it could have disposed of the greatest stumbling-block in this particular plot: that of making argillite seem as much worth stealing as the traditional gold bullion or Egyptian treasures. That difficulty demands considerably more evidence of the market for Indian artifacts than the author gives.

According to the publisher's blurb, Mrs. Harris has settled into a routine of producing one book per year. If she is to repeat her triumphs in *Raven's Cry* and *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild*, she needs to work at less speed and with more regard to narrative probability and coherence.

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# Mouse Woman Once More

*FRANCES FRAZER*

*Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads*, Christie Harris. Illus. by Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1979. 131 pp. $8.95 cloth.

Sequels are notoriously hard to write, and critics are notorious for falling upon them with sharpened pens. Mouse Woman, the small heroine Christie Harris has resurrected from anthropologists' accounts of folk-tales of the Northwest Coast Indians, has a passion for "making things equal" and would probably like to reverse the negative trends. And so would I. But the sad truth is that *Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads* has less charm and interest than its immediate predecessor, *Mouse Woman and the Mischief-Makers*, which itself failed to measure up to the original collection, *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses.*

Part of the trouble may be, as J. Kieran Kealy has suggested in a review of the *Mischief-Makers* volume (*Canadian Literature* No. 78, Autumn, 1978), that Harris "exhausted the potential of the character" in the first book and has since been forced to intrude Mouse Woman into tales where she has no traditional business and very little plot function – except of a contrived kind. Certainly she is almost extraneous to three of the *Muddlehead* stories. In "Robin Woman and Sawbill Duck Woman" she merely gives dream guidance to hunters seeking Robin Woman for their chief, who aspires to two supernatural wives. Since a second hunting party comes upon Sawbill Duck Woman by accident, it appears that the chief is fated to achieve his foolhardy ambition and that Mouse Woman's somewhat malicious assistance is unnecessary. Thereafter, the reader might easily forget all about Mouse Woman were it not for authorial nudges: "Only Mouse Woman noticed . . .", "Only the invisible little busybody saw . . .", "Only the tiny narnauk watched . . . ."