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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 . . . ."

In "The Sea Hunters Who Were Swallowed by a Whirlpool" she has scarcely more to do. When Dragging-Along-Shore, enraged by his failure to find fish for his starving family and hence fame and a chieftancy for himself, maims a small blue cod, he and his fellow anglers are transported by whirlpool, canoe and all, to the depths of the sea and a huge, dim house hung with seaweeds. Mouse Woman promptly appears to inform the crew that they are in the house of a "Killer Whale monster" whose slave their leader has crippled. She advised propitiation with the food in their canoe, and then she vanished. "The sea, after all, was none of her business . . . ." Quite so.

In "Asdilda and Omen", the least artistically shaped of the collection, Mouse Woman is not formally present at all. We are told only that Princess Omen, sole survivor from her Haida village after a volcanic eruption, occasionally follows a small white mouse and so reaches a way-station on her quest for a worthy husband and the regeneration of her clan.

Kealy's related objection, that Harris "distorts the substance and meaning of the original legends", is, as he says, a less important one. Like languages, folk-tales evolve continuously. Robin Hood's legend ballooned out of a few ballads; mighty Sir Lancelot emerged from a kind of cuckoo's egg planted in the Matter of Britain by nostalgic Normans. Anthropologists and historians may object to the unprecedented status accorded Mouse Woman in the Harris books, but for readers of literature her main faults derive from her sideline situation and her sketchy character.

Perhaps, having dared some invention, Harris should have dared a bit more and given her titular heroine more personality. The reader of any of the collections swiftly learns that Mouse Woman is a benevolently meddlesome Mrs. Grundy, that she adores giving advice in "imperious squeaks" and receiving payment in wool to tear with her "ravelly little fingers", and that she customarily tests prospective protégés by appearing to them as a lame mouse struggling to get over a log. (In fact, the reader soon feels that any Indian of Mouse Woman's world who does not go out of his way to help lame mice over logs is too stupid or too heedless of his native mythology to merit concern.) But apart from this handful of characteristics and habits, repetitiously described, the little narnauk is undeveloped. She can't even engage our sympathetic alarm, being immune to death and – thanks to her magic and wisdom – to serious disappointment. In the first collection she had a novelty's charm. In the second and third, both she and the terms that present her become a little boring. Douglas Tait's illustrations, again handsome, though rather sombre this time, omit her and so don't help.

But Christie Harris is still an adept storyteller and an evocative transmitter of the Indian cultures she has studied for years. Although the plots of these seven stories are not very memorable, individual scenes are powerfully rendered. The restlessly prowling Mink Beings, the vast,

shadowy monster-guests in the Killer Whale house, and the deceitfully alluring presences of the House of Pestilence, where a kindly hero is beautified and a nasty young woman is crippled, are all persuasively described. They come across as authentic age-old fancies and nightmares. And in the strictly human scenes, manners and mores are conveyed with satisfying precision. Harris's tone can dip into coyness, and I think she overdoes repetition, even if it is faithful to ancient storytelling technique, but her style is normally brisk and connotative, and she doesn't pull her punches.

With such narrative skills and her special knowledge of Indian history and lore, Christie Harris might now do well to tell us some stories unhaunted by her special narnauk. If I were Mouse Woman, that's what I would advise.

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The "Other World" Revisited

VERNA REID

The City Beyond the Gates, N. Roy Clifton. Illus. by Tibor Kovalick. Scholastic-TAB, 1977. 118 pp. $1.05 paper.

This first novel by N. Roy Clifton is a fantasy written for children following the conventional mold, but with a new twist. Mr. Clifton uses the structural apparatus of traditional fantasies, but combines this with an allegorical dramatization of the pernicious effects of modern technology. The title of the novel is an accurate indication of its contents. The story opens with its young heroine, Janey-Ann, peering through a tree-trunk fence at a strange, barren land, which is dominated in the distance by a high, white, city tower. Janey-Ann yearns to transform the ugliness of the