A Canadian Fairy Tale: What Is It?

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In his article "Little Red Riding Hood as a Canadian Fairy Tale" (*Canadian Children's Literature*: Number 20), 1980) Nodelman begins:

> In another time and and another place, our European ancestors made up the stories we call fairy tales to entertain each other.

I was arrested by this opening statement which may at one time have been applicable to Canadian educators. The assumption that we all have European ancestors is out-dated. When faced with a classroom of native Indian and Metis teachers-in-training, a professor soon learns to avoid the all too familiar reference to "our" European heritage. European heritage and folklore do not apply to the Indian students in our classrooms, nor to many other immigrant groups now living in Canada.

In his article Nodelman advances the thesis that Canadians do not have a folklore of their own. In an experiment with his students of children's literature at the University of Winnipeg, he found that they did not know or relate to folklore of the original inhabitants of Canada. Rather, he believes, the old fairy tales from Europe form the folklore of Canadians of today.

Nodelman says that we do not

> . . . remember and retell the stories that have emerged from and that describe the place we live in – the folk tales of native North Americans so beloved by Canadian publishers of children's books. Despite their oral characteristics, and contrary to the attempts of many Canadian writers to forge a distinct cultural identity out of a deeper consciousness of the land we live in, these North American tales have less to do with us than we assume they should.

He then describes an experiment in which he asked forty-one university students to write the story of Little Red Riding Hood as they would tell it to children. He analyzed the results and states as his conclusion,

> The fascinating thing is that it is 'Little Red Riding Hood' and a number of other European fairy tales that have this power over us . . . and not the legends of Glooscap the Indian or Agayk the

Eskimo. We may enjoy these stories; we do not remember and retell them as we do fairy tales. Apparently these tales still speak to us in a special way. Why this should be so is unclear; the important thing is that it is so.

The Canadian education system is patterned after the European model and for many years European and especially British materials were largely used. It is only recently that attempts have been made to broaden the content so as not to exclude children who cannot identify with "our" European heritage. One of the consequences of this multicultural approach is an attempt by Canadian publishers to include folklore of North American Indians.

But this is a relatively new phenomenon. It is only the present generation of school children that is being exposed to well-written North American Indian legends. Many teachers and librarians are not familiar with North American folklore. Indian legends were not found in any appreciable numbers in traditional libraries so the opportunity to learn to love them as they have learned to love European fairy tales was not present.

Native parents have always kept these legends alive and have passed them down from generation to generation. The educational institutions have played no role in this process in the past and are still contributing very little.

This should come as no surprise. Indian culture was systematically suppressed. When Clifford Tobias, an Indian, applied for a teaching position in 1918, his immediate superior wrote to the deputy minister of education, "I would not advise putting an Indian in charge of an Indian school. These children require to have the 'Indian' educated out of them, which only a white teacher can help to do."[1]

Educating the "Indian" out also meant suppression of all folklore. As a result most Canadian children are familiar only with Hiawatha and some of Pauline Johnson's poetry. "Hiawatha" was Longfellow's interpretation of Indian folklore and, although interesting in itself, it has lost much if not all of the original flavor and style of Indian folklore.

Pauline Johnson played a significant role in early Canadian unity but she was a mixed-blood who had learned to function in white society and who wrote for a non-native readership. Original native legends in all their richness and splendor were never taught so it is not surprising that they are not retold and remembered. In fact, many have been forgotten even by Indians who were educated for long

periods of time in residential schools, far from their own cultural influences.

Attitudes towards Indians have changed greatly in the last ten years and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of legends. Most teachers and librarians have been exposed to Arbuthnot's *Children and Books*. In the 1964 edition she writes of Indian legends,

> . . . they are by and large, neither sufficiently dramatic nor well enough organized to command interest.

and she continues,

> . . . the variants of old world tales collected among the North American Indians gives one the impression that their narrators were incapable even of preserving a good tale, to say nothing of inventing a new one. While this may sound like an extreme statement, as a matter of fact, it is largely true.

She goes on to say that there are a few good ones that have been sufficiently edited and advises,

> These stories may be used in connection with an Indian hunt about some particular tribe, along with realistic stories about the same tribe today.[2]

She does not suggest that Indian legends are worth using as literature and this attitude has long prevailed among teachers and librarians. European folklore is taught as being universal and even in training native teachers are assigned such activities as translating nursery rhymes into Cree or writing "Indian" legends based on European fairy tale models. There appears to be little respect for Indian legends and even less attempt to understand the basic differences between a European fairy tale and a North American Indian legend.

In the 1972 edition of *Children and Books* a complete up-date on the section on native legends is found. The author, Zena Sutherland, now includes the work done by Schoolcraft on native legends and the section reads,

> . . . not until the 1830's was there any serious attempt to bring together the rich body of existing material . . . and folklorists in the United States and Canada have collected a great and varied storehouse of Indian folklore.[3]

Though this move toward Indian legends started in the 1830's most of the folklorists were anthropologists and the form and style of the

legends were geared to adult readers. It is only recently that legends have been re-written for young readers. One of the best works of this kind by a native writer is the *Nanabush Series* by Daphne "Odjig" Beavon.[4]

In 1964, Arbuthnot, talking about the polygenesis or multiple origins of folktales said,

> . . . this theory would seem to account for 345 variants of Cinderella found in Egypt, India, all parts of Europe and *even* [italics mine] among North American Indians.[5]

In the 1972 edition we read,

> This theory would seem to account for the literally hundreds of variants of Cinderella found in Egypt, India, all parts of Europe and among North American Indians.[6]

One little word is omitted, but what a difference it makes in influencing the reader's attitude toward a group of people and its folklore!

My curiosity was piqued by Nodelman's article. The majority of students I teach are Indian and Metis. Nodelman does not mention nationality, but he says his students were from Manitoba. One can assume that Indian and Metis students were not present in any significant numbers. Would Nodelman's experiment, repeated at Brandon University with Manitoba native students show the same results?

I asked forty-eight students to write out the story of Little Red Riding Hood although none was taking a course in children's literature at the time. I simply asked them to write the story, and told them I would explain why later. They co-operated with enthusiasm and amusement, curious about the purpose. The next day I read them Nodelman's article. They responded with some indignation to the reference to Glooscap who is, after all, an Eastern Canada legendary figure, and showed great interest in how the two studies might show similarities and differences.

Nodelman reported that all but one of his students knew the story. The same held true for the Brandon experiment, where one student wrote a contemptuous version which was not an original. Like Nodelman's class, the Brandon group eliminated a great deal of violence found in the original Grimm version. Most took care of the wolf without killing him, a few had the grandmother killed and only

one student went back to the Grimm version where the wolf was cut open and the grandmother taken out.

But there were other differences, differences that probably can be attributed to different cultural outlook.

The elements that Nodelman lists as being common to the original versions and the versions of his students are as follows:

1. an opening sentence containing the phrase "Once upon a time" or some variant thereof;

2. the information that Little Red Riding Hood wears red, lives in a cottage and has a sick grandmother;

3. a basket of food for grandmother as a rationale for the trip;

4. a picture of Little Red Riding Hood "skipping merrily";

5. a meeting with the wolf, who then runs to grandmother's house and disposes of her;

6. above all, the conversation between Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf ending with the words, "The better to eat you with, my dear," said the wolf. These words almost never vary.

7. consistency in the stories disappears after these words but the pattern of terror and the vulnerability of the child remain the essence of the story.

The results of the Brandon sample differ on most of these points though some similarities exist.

1. Approximately half of the students started with "Once upon a time" or a variant thereof. The rest told the story in the present with the opening sentences "Little Red Riding Hood was taking a walk" and "Little Red Riding Hood's mother asked her to take food to her grandmother" being the most common. This way of beginning a folktale is consistent with Indian folklore.

2. Only fourteen students mentioned red clothing at all and of these several pointed out that the grandmother had made the clothes for Red Riding Hood. Where she lived was rarely mentioned, but the fact that she lived with her parents was. Fewer than half said the grandmother was sick. Even those that said she was bedridden frequently pointed out that she was

"old" or "frail". In discussing the results with the class afterwards a number expressed surprise that the grandmother was supposed to have been sick.

These variations would indicate the importance of the extended family and the role grandmothers play in Indian children's lives. The grandmother did not live at any great distance from Red Riding Hood's home, in fact "forest" was hardly mentioned but bush, thicket and trees were.

3. The basket of food was the rationale for the trip in all cases but one. In that version lunch was still carried but how was not specified.

4. Fourteen students portrayed Little Red Riding Hood as skipping along merrily. These students also had the mother admonish her not to talk to strangers. Of these, only two returned to the moral in the end, saying Red Riding Hood never talked to strangers again.

5. Thirty-four versions had a meeting between Red Riding Hood and the wolf but if there was any threat to her (six versions) she was unaware of it. Thirteen writers were very explicit in explaining that the wolf was after the goodies in the basket. Over and over again it became evident that Little Red Riding Hood routinely took food to her grandmother, in some cases daily, in others on Sundays. In one version the wolf had been watching this lunch ritual for so long "the smell of the goodies was driving him crazy" so he decided to rob the old lady of her lunch. Only five writers had the wolf kill the grandmother for it.

   It is important to remember that the wolf plays a particular role in Indian folklore and religious belief - he is frequently referred to as the brother to man, not his enemy.

6. Most of the students attempted to repeat the conversation but very few reproduced it all. Little Red Riding Hood smartens up in many versions before she finishes the whole pattern and realizes that granny looks peculiar. "Peculiar" seemed to be a favorite adjective. One version stated,

   There was something wrong with granny. She said, "My granny, what big ears you have. But that's not all, you also have a big nose, big teeth. My God, you must really be ill.

The climax of the story, according to Nodelman, is the words "The better to eat you with, my dear." These words hardly appear in the Brandon versions. This is consistent with the fact that the wolf was, indeed, after the goodies. It also follows the model of many Indian legends that appear, to the non-native reader, to go on and on as event follows event.

7. Not all the students had time to finish writing the complete ending so the sample number was reduced to thirty-seven. Eighteen of these had a woodcutter, who in thirteen cases killed the wolf. Three writers specified that an axe was used. Where a woodcutter was not mentioned as the rescuer it was a friend, man, lumberjack or most commonly a hunter. Where the wolf was killed he was shot but in most cases he was scared away. In only three cases did Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother escape without the help of a male rescuer. A surprisingly large number did not know the ending, considering the detail of the earlier part of the story. Seven admitted to not knowing what happened after Red Riding Hood discovered the wolf. But then, in the thirty versions left in the sample, a high degree of consistency reappeared. Somehow the wolf was disposed of, granny reappears, and with gratitude to their deliverer, Little Red Riding Hood, the grandmother and the rescuer sit down and share the goodies. Only after the goodies are eaten do seven versions conclude with, "They lived happily ever after."

Some of these variations could well be attributed to cultural differences. The extended family, the sharing of the food, the attitude toward the wolf - all reveal a different outlook. Nature was interpreted in more friendly, familiar terms.

In his analysis of the story Nodelman says, "the essence of the story is a pattern of terror." This was not evident in the Brandon University samples. The essence of the stories was much more one of a struggle for a prized item, namely delicious food. The emphasis was much more on the trickery involved in getting it, an integral component of most Indian legends.

A factor that would significantly influence how the tale is told is how the student learned it in the first place. Nodelman says of his students, "I have never found one who did not know this story, or who did know how he first came to know it." Nodelman's writers, in all likelihood, had always known the story, having learned it at home during early childhood. One hundred percent of the Brandon sample said they had not heard the story from their parents, but had first

heard it at school from their teachers. One said he had first heard it on the radio.

For many of these students English is a second language and the story and especially the language patterns might not have had as great a significance as for the English speaking child. In all cases it was merely another aspect of education imposed by a foreign culture and as such was hardly to be classified as "real" folklore.

Nodelman says we do not retell the stories of North American natives, but his vision is too limited. He says university students, ". . . show the current condition of what has to be considered a genuine Canadian folk tale, a story told and remembered by Canadians." In making this statement he is not speaking of a representative sampling of students across Manitoba.

When he says legends of Glooscap do not have the power over us that Little Red Riding Hood does he is probably right if he is referring to Manitoba students. Glooscap is a legendary figure from Eastern Canada, little known in the west. But can he say legends of Nanabush (We-sa-ka-chak) do not have a hold over us?

After nine years of teaching courses in Children's Literature, Oral Narratives and Native Literature to Indian and Metis students from the prairie provinces, I have yet to find a student who is not familiar with this unusual character. I have yet to find a student who cannot tell a Nanabush or We-sa-ka-chak legend with competence and appreciation.

There is nothing in European folklore that is akin to this half-person, half-spirit of Indian mythology. He was the son of the West Wind and the great grandson of the Moon. His unusual ancestry gave him unusual powers.[7] The only thing one can do with Nanabush is to accept him and get to know him – for to know him is to love him. He can change shape and form at will and he can be stupid, but he is also wise and always lovable. He is always attempting the impossible and always in trouble. A child can make mistakes all day long, but can go to bed at peace with himself and the world, knowing that Nanabush too was always in trouble, yet was dearly loved by all.

Nanabush has been used to teach everything from the rules of fair play to sex education. All Indian culture groups have this trickster figure, whether he be called Nanabush, We-sa-ka-chak, Badger, Coyote or Raven.

Where is Nanabush today? Ron Roulette, a Cree storyteller from

Northern Saskatchewan, says rumors are always abundant regarding Nanabush's whereabouts. Some say he has moved to an island because white people talk too much, but on the other hand, some say he is in Ottawa working for the Department of Indian Affairs.[8]

Children do not communicate their knowledge of native cultures and legends readily in schools, largely because the atmosphere has not been conducive to doing so. Canadian publishers are ahead of Canadian teachers and librarians in their search for Canadian literature from various ethnic backgrounds. If Little Red Riding Hood is indeed a Canadian fairy tale, it holds that position only because there has not yet been sufficient time for a change.

[1]D.B. Sealey and Verna Kirkness, *Indians Without Tipis* (Agincourt: The Book Society of Canada Limited, 1973), p. 32.

[2]May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books* (London: Scott Foresman & Co., 1964), p. 172.

[3]May Hill Arbuthnot & Zena Sutherland, *Children and Books* (London: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1972), p. 172.

[4]Daphne "Odjig" Beavon, *Nanabush Series* (Ginn, 1971).

[5]May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, (London: Scott Foresman & Co., 1964), p. 140.

[6]May Hill Arbuthnot and Zena Sutherland, *Children and Books* (London: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1972), p. 139.

[7]Daphne "Odjig" Beavon, *Nanabush Series* (Ginn, 1971).

[8]Ron Roulette - tape recording, to be released shortly by the Native Education Branch, Department of Education, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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