Hubert Evans: Whittler in the Wilderness

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Son of the Salmon People, Hubert Evans. Harbour Publishing, 1981. 166 pp. $6.95 paperback. ISBN 0-920080-28-6.

> On fine summer afternoons
> an old man comes to this beach.
> Some days he just sits
> Other days he whittles.
>
> Mostly he whittles shavings.
> But when the mood is on him
> he whittles toy boats.
>
> His boats are not well shaped.
> He knows this and leaves them
> for the tide to take.[1]

The old whittler of this poem is almost certainly the poet himself, Hubert Evans; the whittlings are the hundreds of stories, plays and poems that he has written during a lifetime of almost ninety years. Fortunately, the editors of Harbour Publishing have ignored Evans' humble dismissal of his "not well shaped boats" and reissued one of his most successful toy boats, a 1956 children's story called *Mountain Dog* which has, significantly, been retitled *Son of the Salmon People.*

Like almost all of Evans' fiction, be it written for adults or children, *Son of the Salmon People* celebrates the quiet, simple beauty of northern British Columbia, the land where he came in his twenties and where he has lived for almost 70 years. The new title hints, perhaps, at the reason why this particular story deserves to be re-examined, for it suggests that Evans can no longer be dismissed as a writer of animal stories, an imitator of the frankly anthropomorphic tales popularized by Roberts and Haig-Brown. Instead he must be confronted as one of the first children's writers to explore, sensitively and sensibly, the culture of the Northwest Coast Indian, and ultimately, this story is not really of a dog, but of a people and a way of life. In a sense, it is a children's version of Evans' highly acclaimed adult novel, *Mist on the River*, a story which remains, even today, as one of the most balanced and unbiased portraits of Indian culture ever published in Canada.

As in *Mist on the River*, the major conflict in *Salmon People* is between two cultures, a conflict clearly announced in the story's first sentence: "Pitchpine had changed during his three years away. Even before he got out of the bus, Hal Radigan saw that. It did not look like an Indian village any more" (p. 9). The change is symbolized by the first building Hal sees, Belile's Motel, a grotesque row of tourist cabins hewn of imitation logs. Hal soon realizes that his once proud village has become a tourist attraction, a pathetic side-show barkered by the mysterious and malevolent Belile.

In this changed world, Hal does meet at least one individual who is not afraid to stand up to Belile, an airedale dog named Rory who is clearly patterned after Derry, the airedale who dominates Evans' three most widely known children's stories, *Derry of Totem Creek, Derry, Airedale of the Frontier,* and *Derry's Partner*. Hal also finds in his own grandparents – his old people – a similar resolve, a refusal to give in totally to the white invader.

Hal, sensing that Belile is destroying his people by making them forget their past and their proud traditions, spurns the invader's lucrative job offer and decides instead to test his grandfather's new canoe and, in the process, his own manhood, by bringing it down the very river that earlier had claimed the lives of his parents. Hal's journey to manhood is described in meticulous detail as Evans, benefiting from his long experience in the wilderness, provides a veritable survival manual. The reader learns how to read a river, how to survive a "chinook" and even how to make fish hooks. Most importantly, he learns the sense of accomplishment that accompanies anything truly done on one's own.

During this somewhat solitary journey, Hal does, however, meet two white men who ultimately become invaluable allies in his battle with Belile: Pete Devon, a fishery inspector, and Corporal Sparling, a rather stereotypic, rugged, but kindly R.C.M.P. officer. More importantly, he is reunited with Rory, thus establishing the relationship that will inexorably repel the invaders and lay waste the Belile empire. Belile's demise actually begins when Hal and Pete successfully establish a salmon counting station, thereby proving the ecological value of an area Belile intends to ravage for its lumber. The station, of course, is finished just in time as old friends show up somewhat melodramatically at the last possible moment. The ultimate fall of Belile, however, occurs, in a rather unrealistic dénouement, when Rory identifies him as the man who abandoned his dead master, pocketing the money given to him to hire a rescue party.

Such a brief sketch of the plot of *Son of the Salmon People* is rather

unfair, for it suggests that it is nothing more than another of those horribly predictable 1950's boy's adventure stories, replete with animals who are constantly grinning, winking, reproaching, etc. *Salmon People* is more, and the main reason for this is the intensity of Evans' belief in the basic honour and dignity of the people who populate his fictional world. Significantly, the most dramatic confrontation in the story is not between Belile and Hal, or between some form of absolute good and absolute evil, but within Hal himself during a scene in which he must decide whether to risk his life to save a man clearly sent to destroy his world. That Hal saves the invader is not surprising. What is surprising, particularly in books of this kind, is that he almost does not. Hal is not a noble savage in a pastoral paradise, nor is he a drunken alien. He is simply a boy who tries, as his father once advised, to "take the best of the new, keep the best of the old."

The best of the old is the world which Evans so faithfully describes – a world which, given today's stifling urban prisons, may be even more attractive than when it was created some thirty years ago. In any event, somewhere in Roberts Creek, B.C., an old whittler is somewhat bemused by the fact that after ninety years of talking, people are finally starting to listen.

NOTES

[1]Hubert Evans, *Whittlings* (Harbour Publishing, 1976).

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