The Vision of that Mask

James Houston

When I was very young, my father visited the Indians of the prairies and the far west almost every year. Returning from his travels, he brought gifts of heavily-beaded moose-hide moccasins. My sister and I would joyfully jump into bed with him in the mornings, watching and listening as he drew pictures and told us stories of the wonderful things that he had seen.

Growing up in Ontario, I spent an important part of my early life on Lake Simcoe. There I knew an old man who introduced me to his Ojibwa people. I sometimes fished with him and gathered wild rice with them in their canoes. For me the Ojibwa became a strong link with the past, and they helped me shape my future.

As a young student of twelve at the Toronto Art Gallery, I never thought of writing and had not yet chosen a particular field in art. My friends and I laughed and painted and happily hit each other over the heads with rulers. Then one morning, Dr. Arthur Lismer, a great Canadian art teacher and member of the Group of Seven, who had just returned from the Congo, played African music through the galleries and danced among us, his face covered with a huge carved mask. The vision of that mask shook me to the core, and I was hooked forever on the art and lives of primitive people. I wanted to go to all the farthest corners of the earth.

In 1940, I joined a Highland regiment and journeyed to both the North Atlantic and the Pacific. When World War II was over, I went to Paris and studied life drawing. In 1948, I left with my sketchbooks, traveling slowly through Cree, Nascopi and Chippewyan Indian country. In Canada's far north I lived with the Inuit for twelve years. Most of that time I spent on West Baffin Island with the Sikusalingmiut. Their very different way of thinking, their perceptive way of seeing, had a great effect upon my art and my whole way of life.

None of those far nothern people relied upon the written word to convey their delights or fears of their astonishing and sometimes magical world. They used that age-old art of oral storytelling which involves the breathtaking excitement of the human voice mixed with animal sounds and shouts often accompanied by dancing and the rhythm of the drum, the howling Arctic winds or strange songs sung in a young woman's throat. Sometimes the storyteller's helper clicked a goose quill against his teeth to help build excitement and

suspense. As a drawer who would one day write down stories, how could I have dared to dream of any better education than listening to their day-by-day adventures and their legends of the past?

Of all those times in the igloos and dance houses, I best remember the words of my advisor, the old hunter and kayakman, Kiakshuk, a famous Eskimo carver, singer, dancer. He had seen the lives of Baffin Islanders change. He said to me, "When I was a young man, I knew an Inuit shaman who still possessed an ancient magic power. They say that man could rise up through the smoke hole of the big dance igloo and leap astride a drum beat and ride it into that other world beneath the sea or in the sky, the worlds we ordinary humans do not see."

It seems to me that most Inuit legends will not translate directly into the kind of stories that our children or adults would find acceptable. Few of their stories have the meaningful kinds of endings that we have grown to expect. Because Inuit live in a small closed society almost everything is known, so the storyteller feels little need to explain anything that is simple for his listeners but may be very complex to the foreign reader. For example, everyone was so well known they did not even have last names.

To write an exciting and understandable story of the far north for children of other societies one would do best to listen carefully for some strange and fascinating core of truth. Then, using that as a central theme, weave around it dozens of important and explanatory facts about the people, their lives and further details of the way they do things. This has long been my method of northern stories and I believe it would well apply to any stories of other cultures in far-off lands.

In *The white archer,* for example, I told about an exciting Indian and Inuit conflict that resolves itself in a surprising way which was a story told to me by my dog team travelling companion, Oshaweetok. I built into that story a caribou hunt which was a part of my own Arctic living experience. In *Frozen fire* I took a true adventure of a boy who was lost on moving ice and how he survived, and I mixed it with a second story of a boy from the south, a search for gold, and a helicopter. It turned into an adventure that explains itself.

I believe having a direct living experience with the culture about which one is writing is invaluable. Later, the best anthropological studies on a particular culture will accurately enrich a story a hundred fold. But scientific papers rarely make exciting reading. A story must be a good story be it part of a children's book or an adult novel and an author must not be tempted to let too many facts get in the way. Authors of children's books have the challenge of combining fact and fiction in a fascinating way. One must beware not to let the factual material take dull control.

James Houston *now divides his time between his sheep farm in New England*

and his house on a salmon river near the Haida Indians on the Queen Charlotte Islands, west of the coastal border between British Columbia and Alaska. He has won many book and film and design awards. In 1966, he was honored with the American Indian and Eskimo Cultural Foundation Award, and he received, in 1979, the Inuit Kuavati Award of Merit. Mr. Houston holds a number of honorary degrees from various universities and is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

James Houston