Little Badger and the Fire Spirit, Maria Campbell. Illus. David Maclagan. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 32 pp. $7.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-1882-7. ***The adventures of Nanabush: Ojibway Indian stories,*** compilers David and Emerson Coatsworth. Illus. Francis Kagige. Doubleday Canada, 1979. 85 pp. $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-14248-X. ***Grey Feathers,*** Wenceslaus Horak. Illus. Jerry Huta. Three Trees Press, 1977. 28 pp. $5.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88823-004-4. ***Tales of Nanabozho,*** Dorothy M. Reid. Illus. Donald Grant. Oxford University Press, 1963, reprinted 1979. 128 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540322-3. ***Star Maiden: an Ojibwa legend of the first water lily,*** Patricia Robins. Illus. Shirley Day. Collier MacMillan, 1975. 32 pp. $5.95 cloth. ISBN 0-02-976690-7. ***Wild drums: tales and legends of the Plains Indians,*** Alex Grisdale as told to Nan Shipley. Illus. Jim Ellis. Peguis Publishers, 1974. 80 pp. $2.50 paper. ISBN 0-919566-35-9. ***The she-wolf of Tsla-a-Wat: Indian stories for the young,*** Anne Simeon. Illus. Douglas Tait. J.J. Douglas, 1977. 44 pp. $6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88894-145-5.

Imagine yourself in a well-stocked bookstore looking for Canadian books which tell your children something about our Native peoples and their imaginative heritage. The owner of the store places seven books in front of you, but you can afford to buy only four of them. Four of the books are collections of stories; ideal, you think, for bedtime reading or for the child who crams his reading into those all-too-late moments between school and other programmed activities like ballet, gymnastics, swimming and music lessons. The other three books are single stories, suitable for reading to a younger child, a pre-schooler perhaps. The state of your finances forces you to make choices, but the process of selection (and of elimination) concerns more than the pocketbook. How do you proceed?

My own experience with the particular books reviewed here may be helpful. I looked at the books with single stories first, to get a sense of the genre, level and visual appeal quickly. With children's books visual appeal is particularly important, both for the buyer and for the child. It can be almost immediately positive or negative, and it has much to do with whether the book sells or not and, more important, whether it is read more than once or not. In the case of the first book I picked up, *Grey Feathers,* the illustrations were off-putting. Presumably meant to be racially neutral, the faces on the characters were for the most part devoid of character or emotion. In addition, their dress was inconsistent, sometimes pseudo-Indian, sometimes clearly European. The story also had problems. Ostensibly an Indian legend about a 'good witch' who flies from north to south and back again disguised as a goose (but becoming a beautiful, charitable maiden on landing), the story seemed to be more of a traditional European folk tale than an Indian legend. In effect, the story was a composite of elements from different cultures, interesting enough to students

of cross-cultural patterns, but inappropriate as an example of the imaginative world of Canadian Native peoples.

The second book, *Star Maiden,* offered a subtitle which indicated both its origin and theme: "An Ojibwa legend of the first water lily." Although this book received the Collier MacMillan Prize for Juvenile Literature ("an occasional award for a book of exceptional worth authored and illustrated by Canadians"), it seemed to me to have a major weakness. Once again, it was a problem with pictures. The simplicity of the water-colour illustrations mirrors the straightforward story line and captures the mythic, universalized spirit of the legend — for instance, the characters are recognizably Indian but not particularized as individuals — but the colour reproductions are simply dreadful, a dreary repetition of pale rusty reds and dark greens that are (with the possible exception of the final scene) quite out of keeping with the beauty and vitality of the story. The legend itself is retold in language that a pre-schooler would find easy to understand, and that a first or second grader could read easily on his or her own. A slight awkwardness, which some children might notice, is the incomplete frame for the main story: at the beginning a young boy falls into the water and is pulled out by his mother, who then tells him the legend. There is no return to the boy and his mother at the end. With some reluctance, I put this book back on the shelf.

Little Badger and the Fire Spirit, on the other hand, made a very different impact. To begin with, it offers a story with substance and detail. Like *Star Maiden,* the story is a variant on the "how things came to be" genre. In this case, it is the recreation of a classic Indian legend of how humans gained the benefit of fire. It too is a framed story, beginning (and ending) with the visit by a contemporary Indian girl to her grandparents' home. The girl, whose name is Ahsinee, is quickly drawn into the grandfather's tale of Little Badger, and of how his persistence in the face of terrible odds but in the spirit of peace and brotherhood allows him to gain the benefit of fire for his freezing people. This is a hauntingly beautiful book, both textually and visually (filled with rich and evocative colour illustrations by David Maclagan). It was also an easy decision to take it home. Highly recommended for children between six and ten, and possibly for some a little older.

And now to the collections. *Wild drums* grew out of the combined efforts of Nan Shipley and Alex Grisdale, the latter a septuagenarian collector of Indian tales from the time when the oral tradition was still strong. There are fourteen stories here, all of the Plains Indians, and all from the "wild drums and bow and arrow days" before the arrival of Europeans. These stories are "chiefly episodes of individual and tribal courage," illustrating through brief anecdotal adventures the interplay of valour, love, the perils of unjust action, and revenge, and all describing a lifestyle in which responsibility for one's own actions is taken for granted. Clearly the collection is meant to teach moral courage and unselfish behaviour. Yet the didacticism is neither obvious nor intrusive. I was

also pleased to see that many of the stories have women as their heroes, women who are just as clever and cunning as their male counterparts, and who also triumph in the end. Although the book is visually unimpressive, there are line drawings to accompany each story. It ends with a six page narrative of Alex Grisdale's own life. I see it as a collection worth having, and recommend it for children from eight to twelve or thirteen.

The she-wolf of Tsla-a-wat, subtitled "Indian stories for the young," is of particular interest, for it is aimed at Native as well as non-Indian children. The book grew out of the author's experience as a volunteer in a Vancouver Island elementary school, where she found that non-Indian children's books, representing an alien cultural milieu, had little appeal for her Native students. Taking her inspiration from Marius Barbeau's *Totem poles,* she recreated in short and simple narratives the legends represented by certain poles. There are six of these tales in the collection, ranging from narratives with a moral at the end ("every time the boys saw the crest they were reminded that it is always best to obey the elders"), to stories of "how things came to be," to straightforward accounts of daring, bravery and adventure. In each story it is a child who is the focus of attention and the centre of the action, so that reader identification with the protagonists is easy and immediate. I was particularly impressed by the Introduction, aimed directly at children, which begins with the captivating sentences: "Pretend you are living on the northwest coast of North America before the white people came. Of course you are an Indian." From this point, in six pages of smallish type, Anne Simeon builds up a detailed picture of life as it was for Native peoples of the North West, as seen from a child's perspective. Here is a fine example of bridging cultural gaps, between *then* and *now* for the Native student, between *them* and *us* for other children. I recommend *The she-wolf of Tsla-a-wat* highly for children between six and ten.

In our imaginary shopping expedition we have now chosen three books. We have, to some extent, been forced to choose between apples and pears, since each of the books surveyed has its own peculiar aims, strengths and weaknesses. The final choice is between two books which are directly comparable — *Adventures of Nanabush: Ojibway Indian stories,* and *Tales of Nanabozho.* Both books retell the eventful life of Nanabush (or Nanabozho), the mighty Ojibway magician and trickster figure who lived in a time before the world as we know it existed. As David Coatsworth tells us, Nanabush was "a combination of supernatural abilities and human frailties . . . and one of the most powerful manitous, or spirits, of the Ojibway world." Of the two books Dorothy Reid's is the more scholarly and comprehensive, containing twenty-one stories arranged chronologically from the time Nanabozho came to be, "son of the West Wind and great-grandson of the Moon," and including a listing of thirteen sources for the stories. The Coatsworth collection, while it contains five fewer stories, is more exciting in a number of ways. While Reid's book looks like a text for classes in Children's Literature or Native Cultures, illustrated with a few undistinguished

line drawings and complete with Preface, Pronunciation Guide and Bibliography, the Coatsworth book is a large-format beauty (23 cm. by 23 cm.) with a full colour illustration for each story by the Ojibway painter Francis Kagige. The Reid book offers a fuller picture of Nanabozho's exploits, but the style varies from one story to another and is marred by a shifting point of view and sketchy, fragmented story lines. The Coatsworth stories, though originally told by five Ojibway elders, are remarkably consistent in diction, style and point of view.

In both collections there are stories of "how the world came to be" as well as moral fables in which laziness, greed and selfishness get their just deserts while the virtues of thoughtfulness and kindness are rewarded. In some cases the same story is told in a different way in each book. "Nanabush and the birch tree" and "Nanabozho and the birches" offer a useful example. In the Coatsworth story Nanabush shot two deer. He skinned one and left it in his wigwam while he went into the woods to collect the second. He asked a birch tree to stand guard over the first deer's carcass. The tree fell asleep, however, and on Nanabush's return he found the carcass eaten by birds. He flailed the tree with a balsam branch and then threw the gourmandizing birds at the tree. Both left their mark, so the birch tree is marked to this day. In Reid's version, Nanabozho was about to eat a bear he had killed when he imagined birch trees nearby calling him a "greedy fellow." He climbed one of the birches, but caught his hand where the birch met another tree. In the meantime, before he could free his hand, a number of wolves came and devoured the bear meat. When Nanabozho finally freed himself, he made a whip from willow boughs, and scourged the birch, giving it the distinctive markings it has today. The slight difference in the treatment of the protagonist will serve to point out a difference in emphasis in the two books. In the Coatsworth version Nanabush may be stupid, but as he sees it, he has a legitimate reason to beat the birch. In Reid's version Nanabush is painted in somewhat darker colours. He is petulant and mildly paranoid, and he is less imposing as well, able neither to frighten the wolves away nor to free himself from the tree. Coatsworth's Nanabush comes across as a more appealing character. On balance, then, the Coatsworth version of the Nanabush stories is the winner, and is recommended for purchase.

We can leave the imaginary bookstore with choices made, our minds at ease, and parcels attractively gift-wrapped. Back to the real world. If only all our book-buying expeditions for the children were so easy . . .

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