Picture books in Northern schools

Liv Nygaard

It is said that one picture is worth a thousand words; when those words are in an unfamiliar language, the picture's value is increased. At least, that has been my experience in presenting reading material to northern native children who, although relatively proficient in such indigenous mother-tongues as Chipewyan, Dogrib, Inuktitut, Loucheux and Slavey, are still struggling to master the intricacies and inconsistencies of English. Since they belong to a society whose sociocultural information has been conveyed largely by a symbol system of spoken language (i.e. a tradition of oral history), stories and story-telling have great appeal. Because of the aboriginal peoples' extended contact through the encroachment and imposition of the white man's social institutions and their concomitant deculturation-acculturation processes, a vast treasury of northern native "myths and legends"[1] is in danger of being lost to successive generations. Now measures are being taken within the Northwest Territories themselves to record this history while there are still people left who remember it. It is gratifying that a good many Canadian authors of children's literature are tapping this rich literary resource with the result that many excellent books of native "tales" and stories with northern characters and settings are being published. Whether the storyline deals with supernatural events or with more mundane matters of contemporary life, these books have the effect of validating the native child's experience, and lending legitimacy to his or her values at both cultural and individual levels. Thus, they serve to promote self-awareness and pride in a native heritage.

In some schools in the Northwest Territories, cultural inclusion programs endeavour to teach the students components of the traditional native lifestyle. Through enactment, the children engage in hunting and shelter-building techniques, social events, cooking, games, and, in some cases, artistic replication. These cultural programs have been implemented to instill in all students an awareness of and appreciation for the native way of life. For the native children themselves it confirms the validity of the ways of their forefathers and provides them with a more relevant learning experience than that which is often presented in their textbooks. Native language programs are also being used in some schools and efforts are being made to overcome the dearth of informational material in the literary mode.

The students of the school at Snowdrift where I teach belong to the Chipe-

wyan (Dene) nation. Although these children speak the Chipewyan dialect (Athabaskan language group) as their mother tongue, they use English as the language of instruction and learning in school, and increasingly in peer interaction. Their vocabulary and syntax is limited in both languages. As schools in isolated northern communities have become a more established and accepted institution and literacy rates rise, the practice of the oral tradition of storytelling is waning, except for local superstitions (implanted as precautionary devices) such as "the bushman." This generation of children has acquired a greater sophistication developed through curriculum content that forces children to distinguish between real and make-believe, television and video impact (explanation of the mechanics of special effects) and the lessening role of parents and elders as the primary instructors in the ways of "the people." This seemingly inevitable and irrevocable change in tradition has caused a general skepticism in student attitudes towards many beautiful old legends. At the same time, their obvious yearning to receive an adult's confirmation of the veracity of the stories serves as a poignant reminder of how much has been lost to the indigenous people through their extended interaction with white people. There is, therefore, in the northern classroom a need for books that present factual material about northern life and those that retell the kind of traditional tales that we classify as myths and legends.

People of the ice [2] part of Douglas and McIntyre's series, *How they lived in Canada,* is a valuable classroom resource for enterprising teachers who want to present the traditional Inuit lifestyle. This book provides an accurate description through text and illustration of the geographical location, the flora and fauna peculiar to it, and the cultural activities of the hardy people who have populated this vast and seemingly desolate region for so many years. The maps and glossary (which includes words in the Inuktitut language) give a validity to this book which helps to create an awareness of the culture group while dispelling stereotyped images of the smiling, rotund "Eskimo" leading his carefree, albeit cold, existence. At this time in Canada's development, the voices of the nation's indigenous peoples are making us all aware of the controversial issues that now challenge their historical resolution. Not the least of these is the land claims settlement which, one way or another, will affect most contemporary Canadians.

Although *People of the ice* could be "just read" chapter by chapter, in several sittings, the content is so well researched and documented that it would not do it justice to present it cursorily to a class and then return it to a library shelf. In fact, the descriptions and illustrations are so interesting that it would be difficult to give it only a perfunctory reading. The fact that the illustrations are reproducible would increase individual involvement in the text. Perhaps permission for such use should be included in a book that is so aptly designed for classroom instruction. The usual three-dimensional models or dioramas could be made depicting shelter or transportation, using the information and illustra-

tions in the book. The descriptions of the string games and other recreational activities beg to be attempted, an emulation which would emphasize the patience and perseverance of the Inuit, whether at work or play! To make such project work more realistic, interested southern schools could arrange a reciprocal community study. Such an endeavour could culminate in exchange visits.

The final chapter of the book, "The coming of the White People," reminds the reader that, in spite of the overwhelming impact of the acculturation process, many traditional pursuits continue to be practised and that the Inuit are not a vanishing species, but a proud and resourceful people who are determined to maintain more than vestigial cultural activities while they continue to adapt to a transitional lifestyle. From my northern perspective, it is difficult not to become too emotional about the advent of books like this which evoke a thoughtful regard for the Inuit.

Another approach to native culture is that which uses traditional myths and legends. One of the most beautiful examples of a northern picture book is the award-winning *Ytek and the Arctic orchid* with text by Garnet Hewitt and illustrations by Heather Woodall (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982). I presented this book to a group of Grade 4 and 5 Chipewyan (Dene) children who live on the east arm of the Great Slave Lake. Since the very word "Eskimo" is anathema to these children (a mutual dread and mistrust dating back to early tribal skirmishes), it was with some trepidation that I prepared them to listen to a story of an Inuit boy's heroic endeavours. After their initial expressions of distaste, it became evident that my apprehensions were groundless and I found myself recounting this old Inuit legend to a group of rapt listeners.

The format of this book, with its vocabulary list of characters (Inuit and spirits) facilitated its use in the classroom. A large chart was made as a visual reference aid to help the students distinguish unfamiliar names and their relationships. The lavish illustrations, many closely resembling authentic Inuit art, bring the legend to life. Although the text is already rich in descriptive language, these stylized drawings provide the visual impact that makes this legend truly memorable — somewhat like a vivid dream sequence. Copies were made of some of the pictures for the students to work on while they listened to the adventure of Ytek and they were returned with the students' personalized additions. The falcon Tornrak appeared in many colours, from rainbow hues to basic black, and Akla was portrayed in all his gory glory, jaws and claws dripping, his fur matted with cruor.

Ytek's age became a significant factor in the children's enjoyment of this legend. It provided a bond between the youngsters and Ytek. He became a paradox in their minds — they exclaimed that he couldn't do all he did — he was too young! (a gentle reminder of his shamanistic powers). They derided his fears when confronting his Tornrak and the Bear-Demon Spirit (but, after all, they were told to remember, he *was* only twelve-years-old!).

The author has done an admirable job of transcribing this Inuit legend into English and it was with regret that I took liberties with the text in reading it to my class, who are familiar with English only as a second language. Nonetheless, they responded to the various moods of the story. We used the large chart of characters and animals to add phonetic respellings of the animals in the Chipewyan dialect. The students took note of the migratory patterns of the *Tuktu* and realized that they comprised the same herds as their own *Ethén.* This realization elicited a proprietary feeling while fostering an awareness of the similarity between themselves and the Inuit.

Books of this sort helped the children realize the extensive existence of native people as an indigenous population with a rich traditional heritage and an established cultural lifestyle that, although drastically altered by the imposition of the white culture, has survived into the modern, technological age. At this time, many native groups are striving to retain or revive their holistic regard of the life cycle — man in harmony with the elements of nature. This is the type of reading and resource material that is much needed to aid in achieving this objective. With Mr. Hewitt's extensive research of Inuit mythology, perhaps we can hope for more Ytek stories and other northern legends.

Another excellent source for unit study of indigenous authors is Joan Skogan's collection of Tsimshian stories, *The princess and the sea-bear* [3] which I presented to Grade 3, 4 and 5 children. The introduction to the legends, though understated in its brevity, contains the essential ideas of spiritual/earthly interrelationship, the same tenets which guide the contemporary native organizations that are trying to effect a cultural revival among their people. Although the introduction laments the loss of "this circle of connected life" (p. 7), more books of this type could do a great deal to reinstate the value of the oral tradition and its role in community development. The simple yet graphic line drawings enable the children to duplicate the illustrations as they make pictures of the characters and events. I produced some illustrations for the children to colour as they listened. It helped them focus their attention on each story and facilitated a greater involvement in the stories. Although this audience of children did not comment on any familiarity with this collection nor did they draw any parallels concerning their own culture group, nonetheless they were active listeners much impressed with the supernatural content.

Considering the limited extent of their experience, a good deal of paraphrasing and explication is necessary in order to make the stories comprehensible. Had the book included a vocabulary list (with pronunciation key), some diagrams depicting some of the flora and fauna mentioned in the stories, and a map showing the general setting, the children would have had a clearer understanding of such things as cedar, abalone, halibut, ochre, oolichans and salal. The inclusion of these aids goes a long way in holding the interest of children and ensuring a learning experience for them. For a more extensive study of the Tsimshian culture, the provision of the Metlakatla Band Council's address was a

real boon which prompted my students to insist on corresponding with young latter-day Tsimshians. What better way to end a book and begin a study?

For the youngest children in the school Patti Stren's picture book *I'm only afraid of the dark (at night!!)* (New York and Toronto: Harper and Row, 1982) was a popular choice. This delightful book was presented to a reading audience of Grade One and Two children at the time of the summer solstice which, at this northern address, allows me to type my article by the light of the last rays of the almost-midnight sun — a near-perfect set of conditions to read and review the story about a nyctophobic Arctic owl who, with the help of a friend with honourable intentions and ulterior motives, practices throughout the continuous Arctic days to conquer his fear before the onset of the winter months.

Children everywhere can identify with Harold, an owl of "satiable curiosity" and share in his need to know and his subsequent perplexity at adult answers. The mini-lesson presented by his mother to answer his question about "dark" serves as a good motivational device for a science lesson about the tilt of the earth.

The illustrations in the book greatly enhance its appeal. In fact, they provide a "story-within-a-story" because they come complete with dialogue and labels. This makes the book readily adaptable for story drama or shared reading. My students were very impressed that the author was also the illustrator and wanted to know how she could draw owls. The inclusion of Ms. Stren's photograph made this book more meaningful to them as the end-product of an individual's effort. The children became more personally involved in the story and upon its completion they made owls and re-enacted the story for members of another class.

While the children readily respond to the humour in Harold's situation, they also empathize with his fear, and they offer comments and suggestions based on their own experiences. The fact that these children live in a sub-arctic location with similar extremes of solar exposure and light deprivation makes this story especially relevant to them. Because of its suitability for children in the primary age group and its significance in setting, this book will likely become a perennial favourite among northern children. With recommendation, it is sure to find its place on library shelves of elementary schools throughout the Northwest Territories. I have yet to present a story to my students without having some ask, "Show us the picture!" and if there aren't any, hearing "s-cha!" (Chipewyan expression of dismay, contradiction or derision). With little prompting they will draw their own illustrations while listening to the story unfold. Most northern children love to make pictures and will make use of any available medium to portray their conceptions. Pictures of their own original design, as well as those of "bona fide" illustrators, serve several purposes in presenting books to children in the kindergarten to grade 3 level. They help to set the stage for a story, capturing and holding the children's interest (e.g. "This — point and show — is Harold and he has a problem." *I'm only afraid*

of the dark. . . at night!). They serve as a reference point when having children recall information and retell an event in the story. (e.g., "Write a sentence about *Ytek and the Arctic orchid*) Illustrations in books of this nature lend credence to the mystical quality of transmogrified beings and phantasmagoric events. Although one might argue that the illustrations that depict such things are a subjective and artificial imposition of the graphic mode upon the oral one, their insertion seems to corroborate the text. For a generation of children who have daily overexposure to strong visual images through the medium of television, it may even be considered a necessary inclusion for those children who are losing the cerebral art of "conjuring up" their own mental images. Pictures also help to clarify a description of "real" structures (e.g "See the longhouses of the Tsimshian people. They are much longer than our houses, aren't they?" *The Princess and the sea-bear*). And, finally, they provide visual references for many unfamiliar and hard-to-describe objects (e.g "See the Inuit *ulu*. Draw the knife your mother (or father) uses to cut meat and scrape hides," *How the Inuit lived*).

These are but a few of the ways that illustrations can be used to extend a learning experience. If I were an author, I would make every effort to "field-test" my northern story before packing it off to the publishers. The juvenile audience would provide all the feedback an author needed and with little coaxing would furnish the author with illustrations. I am not trying to do any of the excellent illustrators out of a job, but I believe that there should be a place, as well, for children's art in children's books.

NOTES

[1]I feel that such terms are misnomers because they question the veracity of the traditional native folklore which embodies much of the society's perception of reality as explained and accounted for by their ideology of beliefs, norms and values used to interpret human experience and order societal life.

[2]Heather Smith Siska, *People of the ice,* ill. Ian Bateson (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980).

[3]Joan Skogan, *The princess and the sea-bear,* ill. Claudia Stewart (Prince Rupert, B.C.: Published by the Metlakatla Band Council, 1983).

Liv Nygaard *is a classroom teacher who has lived north of 60 since 1976. She has taught in an Inuit community on Baffin Island, a Dogrib (Dene) settlement near Yellowknife, inside the Arctic Circle at Inuvik, and presently works with Chipewyan (Dene) students in Snowdrift, on the shores of the Great Slave Lake.*