Bridge between two realities: an interview with Christie Harris

Cory Davies

Christie Harris talked at her home in Vancouver with Cory Davies in 1982 about native art and legends, historical fiction and fantasy. For this West Coast issue of CCL, Christie Harris and Cory Davies have reviewed and updated the records of that interview.

Davies: I would like to begin by asking you just how you began writing.

Harris: When I was a young teacher in Vancouver – I was teaching grade one, actually – I was always telling stories to the children, and reading stories. I really don't know how it happened. Just one day, out of the blue – I must have been about twenty – out of the blue it hit me. I could write my own stories. I got so excited I couldn't teach; I mean, I could teach, but I couldn't wait for recess and noon and after school; and by the end of two weeks I had nine little stories for children. Little kind of nothing stories.

I didn't know what to do with them, but I was all excited. I took them down to the *Vancouver Daily Province,* where they had a children's page. I just went in and handed them in – all written out in longhand – I didn't even have a typewriter – then I went back to teaching. Then I began to wait, and I was just going crazy waiting to hear if anything had happened. One day when I couldn't stand it any longer, I took a street car and went down to the *Province,* walked in and told them my name. Somebody jumped up from a desk and said, "You left stories here and you didn't leave a telephone number or an address. We're buying them all, and we've already got two of them set up in print." That was the very first time I'd ever tried to write a story, and I'd sold the nine, like that. So I was hooked for life.

Davies: You must consider that there's an incredible power that the storyteller uses and then transmits. You speak with such excitement about storytelling.

Harris: It's just, I grew up with this. My father, an Irishman, was a farmer, and he told stories. His stories were always very funny, extremely entertaining. Everybody came to our farm just to hear him tell his stories. I guess I grew

up thinking stories were an important part of life; a storyteller was a natural part of life.

Davies: You speak of entertainment as being so much a part of the storytelling.

Harris: Very much. I mean, if it isn't entertaining; if you don't want to listen to it; if you're not just delighted with it, forget it!

Davies: What else?

Harris: I would never tell a story to teach anything. It's the story that matters. To me, it's the story.

Davies: And yet you have a commitment to writing that also includes a sharing of other worldviews. I'm thinking particularly of your commitment to –

Harris: The Indian view?

Davies: The Indian view partly; to the Indian legends; to Haida Art.

Harris: Yes, yes, but you don't think of it that way. It's just like my children say, "Mother, you're so disciplined." I don't feel disciplined. I start work every morning at eight, just because it's wonderful to start work. I'm happy to start work at eight. I don't sense a commitment to anything. I just like stories, and they've got to be right. I suppose I unconsciously feel they have to say something.

Davies: For whom do you write them, then? As much for yourself?

Harris: I write the story for the story, I think.

Davies: And the story will take the shape that it needs to take?

Harris: I think so.

Davies: You don't consciously write for a certain market?

Harris: No; I don't consciously write for children. I have it in mind. I even have the American market in mind in that that's where I'm published first. I have to write "labour" "labor" but that's about all the attention I pay to it, just my spelling. And I don't keep thinking – my husband says "You don't write for children; you write for the family." I write the story the way I want to write that story. My editor, Jean Karl, says that children's writers are like that. They write what they want to write, the way they want to write it, and it just happens to be right for children.

Davies: C.S. Lewis says the same thing; that if you're writing the proper kind of story for children, you're writing the story; it takes the form it does because that's the best form in which to say what you want to say.

Harris: That's it. And you're not thinking, "This is for the children."

Davies: Can you talk about your relationship with publishers for a minute? I know you're published by Atheneum, first. What link is there between Atheneum and your Canadian publisher?

Harris: Actually, everything is done in New York, as far as I'm concerned. Jean Karl is a wonderful editor, and I've had her now for practically all my books.

Davies: Could we talk about that relationship? Does she ever make suggestions to you? Could you think of one book in which she's made suggestions that have perhaps changed the shape of a character or an incident?
Harris: Well, more – she's very astute. She will say, "Somehow this isn't right yet. It isn't involving the reader enough yet." But she'll never make a suggestion – she'll never say how. She says, "It isn't scary enough," or "It isn't involving enough." I think it over and she's nearly always right, but she assumes that I'll know how to do it.
Davies: Which was the first book you worked on with her?
Harris: Oh, *Once upon a totem.*
Davies: In 1963.
Harris: You see, I had sold my first book, *Cariboo trail,* to a Toronto publisher, and my contract said I had to send them the next one. I sent them the manuscript of *Once upon a totem*, and they just returned it without any comment at all. They just rejected it. Moira, my daughter, was in New York, and she said, "Mother, I'll give it to an agent." She gave it to an agent who gave it to Jean Karl, who was just starting this brand new children's department at Atheneum. And – now this shows how astute Jean is – she read it, and she wrote back and said, "These are magnificent stories, but they seem to have been written for the ear instead of the eye."

I thought, "I have been writing steadily for radio for twenty-five years. Of course I write for the ear. I write fragmentary sentences. I don't write formal children's literature." Then Jean Karl said, "but if the writer would be willing to do some work on this, I would like to see these stories made publishable." She told me which book of style to read. She told me I had to read a lot of good children's books, just so I could observe that children's literature was not like radio. I rewrote *Once upon a totem* three times. But you see, in Toronto, they didn't tell me. They just sent it back, but they didn't tell me what was wrong.
Davies: Which books did she suggest that you look at, as children's books? Do you remember?
Harris: Oh, dear. It seems to me, *The white stag.* Was that out then?
Davies: Yes....Can we go back to your past? Do you remember children's books that you especially liked in your childhood?
Harris: Not particularly. You see, I lived away out on a farm where we didn't have libraries, and I went to a one-room school where we practically didn't have books. Really, the first time I got into stories they were school readers. You know, "The Lady of the Lake," and things like that which just enthralled me. At home I wasn't getting books, but I was getting my father's stories. As my youngest son says, "Mother, you were lucky you were brought up in the oral tradition. You've got the real feeling for a story." And the Sunday School papers. I mean, they may have been appalling stories, but I waited for them, because those were stories.
Davies: I was wondering, too, if perhaps when you worked first on *Once upon*

a totem, you were influenced by the oral tradition in the North West Coast Indian tales, and if some of that might have been carried over –

Harris: Well, perhaps so, but there's an awful lot of work behind that. I'd been working for radio, and I'd done lots of plays, but I had also done over 350 school broadcasts. I had reached the point where I couldn't broadcast because it was too much teaching. I said to my children, "If I ever say 'yes' again to a series of school broadcasts, shoot me."

I went down to the C.B.C. and I said, "My husband's been posted to Prince Rupert. I'm moving north, and I can't possibly do any more school broadcasts. I am finished." And they said, "You're going up north? We've always wanted to do a series on those wonderful old Indian cultures. Of course, you're the one to do it."

When I got to Prince Rupert I didn't know anybody and had nothing to do. I dived into research for the school broadcasts. I discovered the totem pole; I discovered the Indian villages; I discovered that whole world up there. And there was something – I don't know what it was – but there was something; that North West Coast just clicked for me. A hypnotist said I probably lived there in my past life. But you know, I just had that feeling about it.

I discovered the old museum collections. I couldn't really understand the stories. They didn't always make sense. But then I realized it was because I didn't know the culture; I didn't know the motives of the people. Those stories were told for people who knew the background, who knew the animals, who knew the fears, who knew the culture. And I found that it was just endless. The more I learned, the more I seemed to have to learn about what was behind them all.

I had a very good friend up there, Ken Harris, who's a chief. He was the highest ranking Killer Whale on the Skeena. He was a lab technician, and he was an officer in the militia, and very white-oriented – I said to him one day, "Do you still tell these stories to your own children?" He said, "Yes. Don't children still need to learn about courage and beauty and truth?"

Then I began talking to him about a story, just what did it mean? I had to talk to Ken a lot, and other Indians. I had a wonderful weekend with almost no white people among a lot of Indians. It took me the whole four years I was living at Prince Rupert to really somehow suddenly get the key to these things. Mostly, I got it from studying, studying, studying; talking to the oldtimers, the people of the old missionary families; you know – but I didn't always go by them. I read everything; but mostly, I talked to Indians. It's funny, all of a sudden everything went together, and I seemed to understand them. Now the stories don't look obtuse to me at all.

Davies: When did you first make your contact with Bill Reid, who illustrated *Raven's cry*? Was that during these years?

Harris: No, I knew him before. My daughter Moira went to the art school here, and Moira met Bill Reid at the art school. I had met him then, as Moira's

friend. How he came into this – When I was doing the school broadcast thing, somehow I began to discover these gorgeous argyllite carvings, and how wonderful they were.

It emerged that the great artist had been Charles Edenshaw, and I thought, "I must do a school broadcast about him," but I couldn't find out anything about him. There were two little pages in the National Museum book. I ended up telling the legends that he had illustrated, because I couldn't find out enough about him. That seemed to bother me, and I thought, "Somebody's got to investigate that man, and do a book on him."

So I talked to Bill Reid, and Bill said he'd always wanted to do a book on Charles Edenshaw, but he didn't have the time. However, I said, "If I do the book, would you be my art consultant?" Because I wouldn't dare write a book without it being authentic. He said, "Yes," and so we applied to the Canada Council. They paid Bill to be the consultant, and I had a travel grant to go up to the Queen Charlottes. Everybody said to me, "The Edenshaws will never talk to you. You're a white woman, and they won't talk to you. They're very proud people."

I was so nervous of them not talking to me that I didn't write and say I was coming. I just went. My husband and I drove to Prince Rupert, flew over, rented a blue Volkswagen, and went to the Indian agency just long enough to say, "Where can I find Florence Davidson?" And the man said, "Isn't that odd! Here she is coming!" I looked out the window. I went out and said, "You're Florence Davidson. I'm Christie Harris." She said, "We've been expecting you. We were going to have a reception for you tonight at my house, but we've had a little fire, so it's going to be at my son's house."

Davies: How did she know you were coming?

Harris: I don't know. I think the rumour may have gone round that I was working with Bill Reid. But not only was there no talk of them not helping me; they were going to have a reception for me.

Davies: And she was Charles Edenshaw's daughter?

Harris: Daughter. She had her son, and her grandchildren, the whole clan, there in this son's house. I thought, "How am I going to get them to tell me things?" Somebody said, "White people always come in and say they're going to do a book, and nothing happens." I said, "Well, if I say I'm going to do a book, you know, I'll do it, if you'll tell me something."

I said, "The best thing I can do is tell you the few little bits of things I've been able to find about Charles Edenshaw." So I took out this museum book and I read the 2 pages. First of all I showed them the picture, and there was a gasp. That wasn't Charles Edenshaw! That was somebody else. Then I started reading what the museum book said, and there were positive gasps all over the room. It was wrong, and it was not only wrong, but wrong in a way that they thought was humiliating. By the time I finished, I said, "That's all

the Canadians know about Charles Edenshaw. That's the only thing written about him. So if you want the truth about him, you had better tell me."

Then Florence Davidson, Charles Edenshaw's daughter, and her husband put themselves in our hands. We got the hotel to pack a lunch every day and we took them out to the places where their grandfather had lived, and all these old places they hadn't been to. It was just wonderful. They sat there by the sea and you could just see the old stories coming to life, and the old places coming to life. They told me so many things. By the time I left there I began to see that Charles Edenshaw was a driven man. He was driven to get his culture down in silver and wood before he died. There was no use telling about that, unless you knew what kind of culture he was talking about. Then, they kept telling me the old family stories. A lot of the best stories were way back with the chief he had succeeded, and the chief *he* had succeeded. I found there's no way I could do the story unless I made it three generations. My husband and I moved to Victoria for a year, and took a beach house. I had a million leads to follow up in the archives. My husband read copies of the old ships' logs. Every ship that had gone up that coast, trading or whatever, had all called at Masset and had met the Edenshaws. He read ships' logs – he likes ships. The research I did for that book! But somehow I began to feel as if there was something occult about it. I would not be able to find out what had happened, and I'd go to sleep worrying about it, and I'd wake up in the morning, knowing just what had happened, just as if somebody had told me.

I'd go down to the archives and check it out, and that would be right. I said to my family, "You know, I think some old Haida spirit is helping me out." My oldest son said, "Mother, you know that the subconscious is like a computer. You feed in enough good data and it's going to come up with good answers." But there was something uncanny about *Raven's cry,* and the way it worked out.

What makes me happy is that the Edenshaw family like it. I sent them copies of the book, and they didn't write, and I didn't know what they thought. Then there was a big art gallery show of Charles Edenshaw's work. I went there, and Florence Edenshaw was there in her regalia. As soon as she saw me, she came across the room and kissed me, and her husband said to my husband, "Florence reads that book every day, and she cries."

Quite recently I spoke to a teacher from the Queen Charlottes who said, "The young fellows about 17 and 18 on the Queen Charlottes who are into the renaissance of Haida art regard that book as the Bible, that book is quite a classic."

Davies: Let me read one sentence that really moved me when I got to the end of *Raven's cry.* This is about Charles Edenshaw feeling so driven after his son has been killed, "His race was dying out, and he could not stop the dying. His social order was dying out, and he could only see that it died with the dignity

of the Haida. But one thing was too strong to die: Haida art." I was wanting to ask you about the kinds of strength you see in the art and also in the oral literature. Could you comment on that?

Harris: That was Bill Reid's idea. Before I went up to the Queen Charlottes Bill said, "The culture was expendable, but the art was the one thing strong enough, and it had to live on." That was Bill's feeling, and of course, everything about art in that book is Bill Reid's.

Davies: And yet everything about your energy, in telling the stories, must say something, as well, about the strengths of that world: the stories, and the way they need to be changed so that we can understand.

Harris: Mostly I think those stories were told to people who had all the time in the world to fill in. In the old museum books, you know, there are too many repetitions. Also, I think they are told to a people who are not as technological as we are. They had to be – let's see what I can say.... The people knew everything about the stories, so nothing had to be explained. My chief job was unobtrusively to slip in the information that makes them understandable without ever stopping the story. That was my only concern: get it all in so that they can understand it, but don't stop the story. Don't slow the story. It's my sense of story –

Davies: That carries them on. Yet certainly when I moved into this story world I had no background, and by the time I finished reading several of your books, I began to really understand the kinds of codes that operated in that world, the kind of reverence that the Indian felt for the world of nature.

Harris: Well, isn't it funny? Somebody else who read my books recently said to me, "They're so ruthless. You make the people so ruthless." This was something that Ken Harris explained to me; you know, if the young people married the people they shouldn't marry, they might be impaled on stakes. You can't monkey with rules in an environment like that.

Davies: Can we just talk further about the way you use the sources? I've been reading Boas and Swanson, and I've gone through the Tsimshian mythology and some of the Haida texts, and so on, and I've seen the repetitions....

Harris: Yes.

Davies: It seems to me, though, besides leaving out repetitions, there are other things that you have consciously decided to downplay or leave out. Would you like to talk about that?

Harris: What were you thinking of? Things that are very sexual, or things that are –

Davies: The blatant sexuality, or the blatant physicality, I assume you decided to do something with because you're writing for children.

Harris: Because I think with them living utterly naturally, as they did, that could all be encompassed. It is to try and do justice to what they were, but in our terms. I feel that those people were probably artists and they had to be

eloquent. Some Indians haven't got the eloquence in English to do justice to their own stories. I think those people would have a natural delicacy which is not shown –

Davies: In translation.

Harris: In translation, right. And I think that *that* would give you a misconception of these people.

Davies: I also thought that much of the violence that was in the tales you left out, or you deliberately chose not to use those particularly violent tales to retell.

Harris: Yes, I suppose that's it. I don't go in for violence. And the Mouse Woman things. Now, how that happened – I'd been reading those museum things for about twenty years, I suppose, when I thoroughly got convinced that Mouse Woman was the Good Fairy of the North West Coast. And you know, if you've read them, that she never runs in for more than 3 lines.

Davies: No; she doesn't.

Harris: The thing is, you find her in a dozen stories, and you begin to see what Mouse Woman is. When I had a feeling I was going to do something with Mouse Woman, I got in touch with Wilson Duff, and I said, "I think Mouse Woman is a great little character," and he said, "So do I," and we had a real discussion of Mouse Woman. Of course he, being an ethnologist, had really thought about her and he was the one who said "Mouse Woman represents the Indian concept of keeping all things equal." Now that was an insight of his, but I could see that it was so. And, of course, that's one thing that I use, too. But I had to find her little quirks. I'd only find it in a story here or there. It was just adding everything up together. She's a nice little character. And of course she is also – there are other aspects to Mouse Woman that I haven't dealt with, because –

Davies: You make her very domestic, don't you?

Harris: I'm using just the stories where she does things that suit me for children's books.

Davies: You, in a rather formulaic way, make reference to her love for wool and for the abalone earrings, and you talk about "the ravelly little fingers were tying the woolen tassles into a nesty pile of mountain sheep's wool."

Harris: The children like that, you know. I don't know why I thought of that. But I knew she did have this mousiness.

Davies: Does that kind of formula appear in the original tales which you read, or did you use that kind of formulaic tradition from European tales?

Harris: No, no, I didn't use anything European, consciously. I must have found somewhere her tearing at things. I don't ever use a detail that I haven't found somewhere.

Davies: When she keeps rescuing the bits of wool from the fire, did you find that, as well, in some of the original tales?

Harris: I can't think – I've read so many, but I know that with Mouse Woman I've been very careful to base everything, even if it is only the tiniest snatch, somewhere.

Davies: In 1973, when you wrote *Once more upon a totem*, in "The Prince who was taken away by the Salmon People," you write about an old woman who says, "You have been taken away by the salmon people and you must do this, and you must not." When I went back and looked this up in Boas, she was called Mouse Woman in that particular tale. Were you not on to her then?

Harris: I wasn't on to Mouse Woman then. I didn't get into Mouse Woman until later than that.

Davies: About 1976, about three years later. Often in the tales which you use in Mouse Woman, it has been an old woman who has appeared to the princess, or whatever.

Harris: Yes, or a grandmother, it usually is. But I wasn't on to Mouse Woman then.

Davies: I wondered about that.

Harris: Jean Karl, my editor, loves Mouse Woman. She says, "You know, if you could only find another character like that!

But I haven't.... Do you find when you read those source books, do you find them a little hard to understand?

Davies: I found one of them particularly cryptic. I think it was the Tlingit tales; some of the Haida tales were incredibly disrupted.

Harris: Yes, but a lot of that is in the translation, by white men who are informed by the European ideas.

Davies: Could I talk about your source material for some of your other books? Could we discuss the historical fiction, and then the books you've done about your family?

Harris: Right, okay. The first one, I guess, was *Cariboo trail.* In that I was interested in the Overlanders. I have the complete Overlanders book and that intrigued me, but of course I couldn't use a pregnant woman with little tiny children. They're no fun. So I had to use the setting, but make some teenagers. I've done a lot with the Overlanders, including one thing and another. Of course I'd done a radio play. Then, the next one I did was *Forbidden* – no –

Davies: *West with the white chiefs.*

Harris: When I was living out at Huntington when my children were quite young, there was an old man there who had a little mining museum and somewhere he had picked up Dr. Cheadle's journal. I thought it was fabulous. The more I read it, over the years, I kept thinking the most interesting part was about coming over the mountains. Somehow that boy haunted me. Why had a boy wanted to shoot Lord Milton in the middle of the Rockies? They didn't give you any reason. He was always a good boy with the horses, you know. But all of a sudden, he grabbed the rifle and was going to shoot Lord Milton. Why? So I studied a lot about the Assiniboines to find out what they believed, and

what they believed was that these mountains were really wild places, pretty scary to them. Then there was O'Byrne – he was an authentic character. He might have been very funny to the Englishmen, but it must have been pretty awful for the Indian boy. I just kept looking, kept thinking, in the back of mind for years, why did that boy do that? And when it finally came to me why he had done it – why I thought he had done it – I stuck to their diary, but I made it into this boy's story. Why they went, how anxious he was; and of course, I put his whole mind on his father's keeping this job, and that is why everything meant so much.

Davies: Was the murder true? That the Assiniboine had killed the half-breed?

Harris: Oh, yes, that was absolutely true. Yes, I really do stick to –

Davies: How about the trip to Victoria at the end?

Harris: That was all true. Yes, I thought that was all wonderful. And you know, I had a lot of letters from American children about it. That story looks pretty glamourous to them. My husband, Tommy, helped me a lot with that book because he's much better with horses than I am. He said he'd get my horses over the rockies, because if you tell him what a horse is doing, he'll tell you what its ears are doing, and its tail, and everything.

Davies: When I read the journal, and one of the horses fell down – I don't know what horse you named him in the story...

Harris: Bucephalus.

Davies: That's right. He fell down and he straddled the logs....

Harris: Yes, that was all true, except the feeling behind it, which made it a novel. That was what I had to imagine.

Davies: I liked that book a lot. It had one plot, and it seemed to have incredible momentum.

Harris: Well, there's a professor of English over at Simon Fraser, who had me come over to see his students and I said, "What do you want me to talk about?" He said, "Anything, as long as it's *West with the white chiefs,*" and he said, "*That* book should have had the medal." That's his strong opinion.

Davies: The next book that is still history is *Forbidden frontier.*

Harris: Now that's interesting. You see being from British Columbia, I'm interested in the MacLean Boys. Have you ever heard about the MacLean Boys?

Davies: No, I haven't.

Harris: Well, if you read about the bad men of Canada, the MacLean Boys come in it. They were halfbreed boys who – do you know about the camels on the Cariboo Road?

Davies: Yes – only from your stories.

Harris: The camels were turned loose, and in truth, these MacLean Boys took these camels and used them to stampede cattle, and actually, at 14, one of the MacLean Boys was the youngest person ever hanged in the British Empire for murder. I was intrigued by this, because I'd read an old furtrader's journal in which he said, about the MacLean Boys, that they were such great kids; he'd

known them as kids. They were wonderful, they were bright, and then the Gold Rush came, and their father, who was a furtrader, abandoned them, and they and their Indian mother went back to the Reserve. Of course, they were humiliated and outraged, and wanted to get rid of these people who'd spoiled their world. They grabbed the camels and they did all these things.

I didn't want to write about the MacLean Boys. But those outraged young halfbreeds who'd been in this very good position with a furtrader, a chief trader, and a high ranking Indian mother, for them to be humiliated and outraged, it seemed to me that was such a good situation; and so, I decided to invent the characters. And because I wanted to set it at Fort Kamloops where it had happened, I got into the old journals of the Hudson Bay fort, and that was wonderful. I found, for that year that I wrote about, every day when they'd plant the potatoes, when the brigade was coming, and when the brigade didn't come. And the whole thing behind it, how many horses were in the brigade, and who knew it was coming, and all the background is utterly authentic. The people are fictional.

Davies: But then you manufactured Alison and Ross –

Harris: Oh, yes, to demonstrate – they had to be like the MacLean Boys.

Davies: The mother – I don't know how you pronounce her name, Djā'ada – was a very moving character for me. And she was your creation?

Harris: Oh, yes, completely. Yes. I wanted to make her a Haida, to give her that special pride thing.

Davies: I suppose the Scully family came a little bit from –

Harris: That's from the Overlanders, somewhat. And I use Irish – I always make my pioneers Irish because I know how they talk; I know what they do; I know how they think. If I just make them Irish, I've got it, you know.

Davies: You had an epigraph, too. From Camus, which I found interesting. You quoted Camus talking about man's rebellion against the savage formless monument of history. Do you see history that way, yourself?

Harris: No, the formless *movement*, it said. Rebellion, man's – is it "secular"? – will not surrender. It seemed to me those lines suggested history rolling along, but people aren't going to surrender to that movement of history. It seemed to me that was exactly what I was trying to say. This outrage of the MacLean Boys was a real outrage of real people.

Davies: You didn't write any more historical novels after that.

Harris: No, but I would like to, because B.C.'s got great historical background. No, I just seemed to get engulfed in something else, and something else, and –

Davies: Can we talk about the way you worked with material your own family has provided for you?

Harris: Oh, yes. This has been great. The first one was *You have to draw the line somewhere.*

Davies: Yes, I've read that.

Harris: When Tommy retired, he and I spent a year in Europe, and on the way home, we stopped at Moira's house. She was then working for Bergdorff-Goodman, and she was sketching children's fashions. She had little children coming in from a little private school, and she'd put this Bergdorff stuff on them. They always said, "Oh! you draw so pretty. How do you get to be the artist?" I said to Moira, "A lot of kids would like to know, how do you get to be the artist?" She said so many funny things had happened to her in getting to be the artist, she'd always wanted to write a kind of "our hearts were young and gay" story, but she'd never had time – so I said, "Why don't we do it?" When we had it ready, we took it to the agent who'd already placed my Indian books, and she said, "Oh, no. This is a whole wrong idea. This is a career book. You can't do a career book that way."

Davies: I was going to say, were you trying to do a career book?

Harris: No, we were just trying to do Moira's story. But she said, "In a career book you take the girl for a year and a half and have 'X' this and 'X' that."

Davies: Like formula career books.

Harris: And we said, "But that's not what we want. We wanted to show what it's really like; you know, the awful truth." She thought we were pretty stubborn, so she phoned up about six publishing houses and said, "I have a client here with an idea," and every one of them said, "If your client will write to our formula, fine," and we said, "No way; the awful truth, or nothing!" So she said, "The only person who would conceivably buy such an off-beat career story is Jean Karl, who bought that off-beat Indian legend." She thought those were off-beat. So we went to Jean Karl, and she just began to read it and she began to laugh. She said, "This is wonderful! Go ahead."

Davies: Did she get to the green carpet? I thought dyeing the green carpet was just so hilarious!

Harris: Well, it's all absolutely true. And the way we worked it, Moira and I – you know, you can't have a lot of funny incidents and put them in and call it a story. You have to think where you're going and what the theme is, and so on. We talked about all that and decided where we were going. Then I made lists and lists and lists of every little thing, every little incident I wanted to hear about. And Moira was so busy! But whenever she had time she went into her bedroom and she'd tape an incident. Then when I had time, I'd go into another room and I'd listen to the incident. Then I would write it up. And of course, an awful lot of this – I took notes on my own kids when they were young, and I had lots of stuff myself....Moira had shelves and shelves of art books. I just started burying myself in art. We stayed for a year. Moira was fixing a big brownstone house so they had scads of room, and I read all her art books. She took me down to *Women's Wear Daily* and introduced me to various young fashion artists so I would know how a young fashion artist in New York felt. I followed them around 7th Avenue. I listened to the way they spoke. Moira got all her – we lived in Greenwich Village – she got all her art friends

to invite Mother to their parties. I just soaked in, for that whole year I was there...So much so that when I was doing that first scene of her going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Moira had to go away for a week and just couldn't help me with that scene, I went ahead. Moira had told me the five things that interested her, and by that time I had gotten so much – I felt like a medium somehow. I went though the Metropolitan Museum and I thought, "I'm this young artist, and I would look at that." I just wrote it all up. When Moira got back, she said, "Mother, that's just astonishing! That's just the way I felt about those things." It begins to be just a little eerie. Anyway, we worked it through, and, you know, it was the runner up for the Spring Festival Award from the *New York Herald Tribune.*

Well, when I finished that book, people kept saying, "I liked the sister, Feeny. What happened to Feeny?" So Sheilagh, my other daughter, was living in Prince Edward Island with her children, and I went there, and I said, "You know, Sheilagh, people keep asking, and I'd better ask you about *you.*" She said, "Mother, you never knew what it was like when I was growing up." I'd never worried about her because she was very pretty, very popular, she had boyfriends coming out of the woodwork, she was very athletic. She was always a bit rebellious, but she was just great. She said I hadn't realized she'd always been losing her self-confidence because her sister could draw, and paint, and sing, and play the piano, and get straight "A's". She thought the only thing she could do was terrify the sister by the way she could hang by her toes from that exercise bar, which was a very narrow little bar. I said, "It's just as valid to write about a girl who's losing her self-confidence." So, Tommy and I took a house on Prince Edward Island for a year and –

Davies: Did the same?

Harris: And did the same thing all over again. It was fabulous. We called it, "Confessions of a toe hanger."

Davies: One reviewer – I was going over some of the old reviews – said that it was a "fascinating insight into Canadian family life."

Harris: Well, it is family life. Then I wanted to do Michael, my oldest son, because he's had so many adventures, and such an interesting life, but boys don't want to help you; they don't want to tell Mother a lot of things. So it was that, when I'd gone to Ottawa to get my medal for *Raven's cry,* I met Michael at Expo, and he was going to drive me to his home. He was then a test pilot and aeronautical research engineer at Cornell and he said, "Well, I'll help you if you don't get too personal." He meant, you know, no romances. Anyway, I said, "If you'll help me, great."

I picked up a whole batch of notebooks, at a drugstore, and for the ten hour trip I interviewed Michael, and wrote notes all the way. And so, when I got there, I just stayed there. I stayed at his place for a month. They had a new baby, and I was helping with the baby. Anyway, I had put it down into 14 pages

of headings of things I wanted to know, and Michael started doing this on tape for me.

He did take me down to Cornell and introduce me to a cockpit; he gave me lessons in aerial navigation; he put me into the scene. When I wrote that book I wrote each chapter and sent it to Michael, and he edited it with a tape, and sent it back to me. He took complete responsibility for that book [*Let X be excitement*] because he wasn't going to have his pilot friends and his scientist friends reading it, and finding it wrong.

Davies: After this, it seems to me, your work takes new direction. In the 70s you begin to combine worlds that you have treated before, on their own. In the 60s you were talking about the white world and the Indian world and areas of overlap, past and present. Then in the 70s, you get into very interesting treatments of the scientific world and the mythical world, and the spirit world and the natural world.

Harris: That was interesting. I wrote *Raven's cry* without thinking much about the vision. When that book came out, my youngest son, Gerald, who was an English major down at Stanford, said, "You know, Mother, my friends are very interested in that recorded case of astral travelling," – you know, out-of-body experience. I hadn't really thought about it before, and he said, "They're very interested in the end of the book where Bill Reid says he had Charles Edenshaw over his shoulder."

I hadn't really thought about this before. I guess I was working into it but wasn't conscious of it.

Davies: You said once in an interview that you proceed "via intuition and experience."

Harris: That's right. And with that book I just suddenly found I was into the vision. But I didn't plan it.

Davies: And so, in 1972, when you wrote *Secret of the Stlalakum wild*, you began to combine two very different ways of looking at the world of nature, which, in fact, turn out to be two ways that may be very similar.

Harris: Of course, that Stlalakum thing was when I was raising my children. My children used to go hiking up the mountain.

Davies: Up Devil's Mountain, and to Lost Lake?

Harris: Yes; this old Indian told me about the Stlalakums. I'd had them in my mind, but somehow – it's funny, having an Irish family that I didn't – it just happened.

Davies: You seem to me to have become rather daring as you began to overlap these areas, to combine them.

Harris: That's interesting.

Davies: When you had Morann and Neil looking at the same phenomena from different points of view, both children were relating to the natural world in a very loving and healthy way. You were doing something that was as daring as

what you'd been doing in the 1960s when the publishers couldn't recognize the type of book that you were writing.

Harris: I never think about it. And people ask – people tell me what I've been doing. I never know. I just do what I want to do.

Davies: When you wrote *Sky man on the totem pole?,* your treatment of the space men, who just didn't dare to entertain such notions of the invisible world –

Harris: Well, what happened was Tommy and my youngest son and I were going home one day, and we took a U-turn and looked out the window, and I saw a star falling, and I thought it couldn't be. Tommy said, "It's a plane on fire." So he stopped the car, and I looked at it, and it stretched out into a long finger of fluorescent light. We stood there and watched it for about five minutes – just a brilliant slash of light. Then it began to make flashings and it came straight up and went off with a speed you couldn't believe and I thought, that *is* a U.F.O., and there are people from space. It just hit me like that. All those Indian stories of men from the sky – this was something that had really happened, and they hadn't understood it. They built it up as supernatural. I thought of mixing Indian legend and space. I didn't plan it as anything daring; it just happened.

Davies: Have you had people skeptical about the combination?

Harris: No. No, the review for *Teachers' – The guide for teachers in Canada* – thought it was very intriguing and said it might start a distinctively Canadian type of science fiction. There's a teacher, John Renault, in one of the Catholic schools in London. He sets up his big yearly project for grade 7 on that book.

Davies: I started to look around when I began to realize how much you were interested in energy, matter, and new ways of looking at the limits of previous scientific theories. I looked at a book by Zukav called *The dancing Wu Li masters.* I wondered if I could quote something to you and see whether or not this lines up with the way in which you perceive energy, and auras, and out-of-body experience, and so on. In his book, Zukav argues that there are all kinds of new discoveries about the world of nature which show the limitations of previous theories; that what quantum mechanics and the new physicists are actually discovering is that the way that we've been looking at nature is no longer comprehensive enough to explain everything that we can observe, so we're forced to develop a more inclusive view of the world. It seems to me that in your attempts to give Indian legends to white readers you must be involved with trying to show us another way of looking at the world of nature.

Harris: Yes, but you see, *that,* I must say, is not purposeful. I still say I'm doing the story.

Davies: Were you trying to validate the Indian legends in some way?

Harris: No, I'm not. I just think those people produced one of the world's

great art styles, and one of the world's great oral literatures. No; it's the stories with me.

Davies: The invisible universe must fascinate you, though –

Harris: Yes, it does, and I began doing hypnotism this last time. Hypnotic regression and so on. But, I don't know, I stopped it all of a sudden.

Davies: The invisible world is fascinating, but a bit scary?

Harris: Yes. Things began happening to me, and various psychic friends were saying to me, "You'd better just watch it, you know."

Davies: You must be intrigued with the connections between the human world and the natural world, and the spirit world.

Harris: Yes, I am.

Davies: It has occurred to me that, perhaps of all the people writing now in Canadian literature, and for children, you may be the big bridge builder – your work spans more types, I would think, than many –

Harris: Is that so? Well, I've had more time, of course. I wish I'd started writing books early because I've got all those trunks of manuscripts – of radio scripts. Everything before I was fifty is gone with the wind.

Davies: Is energy a big factor in your writing? And in your life?

Harris: Energy isn't something *I* talk about. My oldest son, the one who's the scientist, the transfer of energy was always the big thing with him. And my youngest son is very much into energy. Maybe I'm unconsciously into energy.

Davies: Two people I've talked to about you have called you incredibly energetic.

Harris: Yes, I hear this on all sides, that I have an energy.

Davies: I think at one point in *Sky Man on the totem pole*? you talked about emotion making a man a power house. Somehow you must think that emotion and the transmission of emotion, maybe through story, is very important.

Harris: Yes. I think that you tune into something.

Davies: The one book that we haven't talked much about is *Mule Lib.* Could you say a few words about it?

Harris: Well, this is the smallest book in the world. Actually, Tommy – he's quite a storyteller – and all the years we've been married, he's been telling stories, funny stories about this mule; so many funny stories that one day I just nailed him to the chair while I got this out of him.

[voice of Tommy, in background, indistinct, at several points in the following paragraph]

Harris: He was at one of those English Boys' Schools when the First World War broke out. Thought all the excitement in the world was going to be over. So he managed to join up at 16, pretending he was 18. He went through the Army School of Equitation, but when he got to France he drew this mule, which was the worst – biggest and worst – mule in the British Army. It's the story of the encounters of this 16-year-old soldier and his mule. It's very funny,

but it's true. We even used his own name in it.
Davies: The mule's name or your husband's name?
Harris: My husband's name!
Davies: Did the mule have a name?
Harris: Just "the big grey."
Davies: How do you come upon names for your characters? I was thinking of Harry Fortune, for example, in *Mystery at the edge of two worlds,* or Lark.
Harris: I don't know.
Davies: Are they symbolic?
Harris: No, no. I just think and think and think, and I try this name and that name, and then all of a sudden the name seems right. When you've named five kids and that many characters it's hard to think of any more names.
Davies: In a couple of your books, the main characters seem interested in gold, or fortune, but it turns out that the treasure is something else. I'm thinking of Harry Fortune, who's after a certain kind of treasure. You must think that there are other treasures to be had.
Harris: Of course. But you see – I used to write about the Gold Rush with a certain enthusiasm. Now, I see gold mining as terrible, spoiling the fish streams.
Davies: Tell me about the fish and your newest endeavour.
Harris: My youngest son and I are co-authoring a young adult novel. He's the one who has the whole background. He's done a lot of writing, but this is his first time with fiction, and it's really fun working with him. He's very creative....
Davies: Is it fair of me to ask you to comment on the role you've played in the development of Canadian children's literature? You have been one of the most prolific authors. Do you see yourself at the forefront of something that's finally coming alive for the majority?
Harris: I see myself as always doing what I want to do, getting an idea, and then finding that that's coming along. I'm always delighted when I find I'm not behind, you know. I never copy anybody.
Davies: Do you see any gaps in children's literature that need to be filled – in Canadian children's literature? I think of people always saying, "There's no fantasy in Canadian children's lit, though Christie Harris comes close..."
Harris: I know this is what Sheila Egoff says. Of course, I have an argument with her European fairytale fantasy thing. For instance, she's all on the great Good vs. Evil, and I have told her, Good vs. Evil does not apply among the Indians. There's no Good vs. Evil. Everything has potential for both.
Davies: Is that why you have no villains, even in your historical books? O'Byrne is not a villain.
Harris: Of course, that's what he was like. Once I said to Wilson Duff, "You know, I can't really find an evil character in the Indian legends," and he said,

"And don't go making one up." That's it. I guess I don't see an awful lot of evil in people, either.

Davies: I wondered about that. Your view on the world strikes me as –

Harris: It's fairly cheerful, perhaps.

Davies: Yes.

Harris: Although somebody else told me that my women are always spirited.

Davies: What do they say about your boys?

Harris: They haven't mentioned those. What do you think about my boys?

Davies: Well, my boy thinks that your boys in the Indian legends are pretty spirited. Louis in *West with the white chiefs* is –

Harris: Pretty spirited –

Davies: Very sensitive, but very spirited, in a strong and perhaps less conventional way than some boys in adventure stories.

What writers do you read now? Do you read the current fiction?

Harris: You mean children's fiction?

Davies: Either, I suppose.

Harris: I read – I love to read. I never seem to have enough time. And I have very catholic tastes. But I particulary like to take a month or two off and just read all the great children's fantasies. I took one summer just to read all the great fantasies, knowing everybody says the English fantasies are the best. But do you know, I liked the American fantasies better.

Davies: Madeleine L'Engle, for example?

Harris: I liked *The Gamadge cup* and *The last unicorn*. Every now and again I allow myself to take a couple of months and just read madly.

Davies: I guess that's fair, since you're giving us so much to read.

[*On September 21, 1988, invited by Cory Davies to update this interview, Christie Harris added news of her recent activities.*]

Harris: At the time Cory Davies interviewed me, I had just received both the Canada Council Children's Literature Prize and the Order of Canada. Shortly afterwards I went into some bad years. I lost my husband of fifty-two years and my editor of seventeen of my books, and I lost both my hips; the hips could be replaced, of course. For a time, I wasn't all that productive. I kept on writing, even though I wasn't writing well. But now, now that I'm once more full of energy, I'm cleaning up all those badly written stories. And I'm very thankful to be active again in giving talks and readings and workshops. In mid October I'm going North to the Nass to work with the native Nishga children. With their North West Coast genes, they could be gifted storytellers. I'm pleased that the Haida people, too, like what I do with North West Coast mythology. They use my books in their wonderfully successful Rediscovery program which gives the young people a wilderness experience. The young people act out my stories. And all this native approval of what I do "makes my heart

sing" so I just keep on writing. And I think that my next book *may* be another bridge between two realities.

Publications by Christie Harris

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