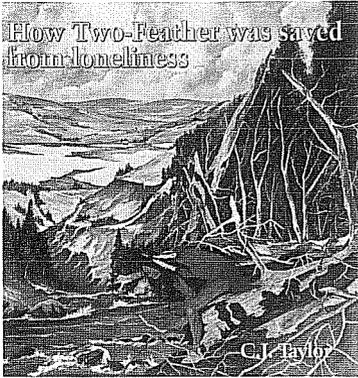


Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

VOICES OF THE EARTH



Nanabosho steals fire. Joseph McLellan. Illus. Don Monkman. Pemmican Publications, 1990. Unpag., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-921827-05-9; **How Two-Feather was saved from loneliness.** C.J. Taylor. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1990. Unpag., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-254-9.

Joseph Campbell, in *The power of myth*, describes our modern need for a revitalized "mythology of the planet," characterized by love of the earth. One of the

ways to encounter this love in its most lasting form is to listen to the ancient stories told by aboriginal peoples. Two such tales from our own Native tradition are legends of the origin of fire, and in each tale the reader senses the unity between humankind, nature, and what Campbell calls "the undefinable, inconceivable mystery" at the heart of life.

Nanabosho steals fire, retold by Joseph McLellan, is a story of the culture-hero and trickster who sets out on a dangerous quest to steal fire from an eastern medicine man, so that his own people may warm themselves. Heroic but light-hearted, he achieves his goal through resourcefulness and humour. Shrinking into the shape of a baby rabbit, he plays on the sympathies of the shaman's daughters, who place him near their father's hearth. Nanabosho allows his drying fur to catch fire, and hurries away across the frozen lake with his prize, leaving his heavy pursuers to fall through the thin ice. So in a willed experience of pain and laughter the hero brings fire to his people.

An Abenaki legend, *How Two-feather was saved from loneliness*, retold by C.J. Taylor, includes the same ancient topic of the origin of fire, here related to the first coming of the corn-plant. A dream-woman, entrancing the human hero, leads him to set fire to a meadow and then commands him to drag her by her hair across the burnt earth. As the appalled lover obeys, green shoots appear from the ground, followed by ears of corn with hair as soft as that of

his visionary companion. The suffering involved in the achievement of fire leads on to a gift of food for the people.

The fire-theft is a universal mythic theme. In European tradition, however, the Prometheus legend tells of a jealous and vindictive god punishing the fire-stealer. In North American native tales fire and food are loving gifts of the Creator, though humans may have to suffer to gain them.

In each of these tales, we are told how the gifts create community. The Ojibwa legend is framed by a story of present-day Native children being taught the origin of fire by their grandparents. The Abenaki tale tells of the loneliness and hunger of the hero before the coming of the corn-spirit who, in giving fire and food, teaches her people how to live in villages.

Today's children need illustrators to show them the scenes once so familiar to listeners of these tales. Don Monkman illustrates the Nanabosho story with realistic pencil and crayon sketches in black and white or natural browns, greens and yellows. His legendary hunters use a different technology from their modern descendants – the open fire is replaced by an oil-drum stove – but the warmth and joy of this natural life is seen to be the same in both camps. One particularly interesting sketch suggests the close bond between humans and animals, as Nanabosho transmutes by stages from man to rabbit.

C.J. Taylor illustrates her own retelling with colourful and romantic paintings, where man, corn-spirit, trees, lake and meadow evoke a unified mood of wonder and strangeness. On the last page the practical life of the village appears, but at its centre is the hero making a ritual offering to the corn-spirit in thanks for her gift.

It is a delight to see more and more Native writers and illustrators retelling their own legends and making them accessible to a public that desperately needs to understand better the unity of humankind and nature. The Ojibwa legend is dedicated to "the Elders who have carried us this far on our Journey." These picture books should help us and our children to turn our steps in a similar direction.

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