

**Past Aboriginal Heroes, Present Myths in Rick Book's
*Blackships and Thanadelthur***

Blackships and Thanadelthur. Young Heroes of North America, vol. 1. Rick Book. Illus. Amanda Dow. Heartland, 2001. 108 pp. cloth & audio CD. \$26.95 with CD, \$22.95 without CD. ISBN 1-896150-12-8 with CD, 1-896150-13-6 without CD.

This first volume of the Young Heroes of North America series consists of two short works of historical fiction for juvenile audiences, *Blackships* and *Thanadelthur*. Although set in different time periods and locations, these stories are related in that their central characters, young Aboriginal people, are examples of what the publisher's website calls "young heroes...real people and real events that changed our history." The first narrative centres on the brothers Domagaya and Taigoagny, sons of the Iroquois leader Donnacona who were kidnapped by Jacques Cartier in 1534, taken to France, and returned the following year to their village of Stadacona, where Old Quebec City exists today. Working with primary resource material — the travel journals of Cartier's voyages — Rick Book brings to life the static images of the two Iroquois boys who appear in the European written record. In the second story, a young Dene woman, Thanadelthur, undertakes a dangerous journey through the "Barren Lands" of northern Manitoba in 1716 in an effort to make peace between the warring Dene and Cree nations and to open up trade for the Hudson's Bay Company. This second story is the stronger of the two, not only because of its remarkable title character but also because of the engaging voice of the young narrator, William Stuart, a Hudson's Bay Company "servant" or junior employee who accompanies Thanadelthur on her journey.

Some readers will find the book's captioned photographs, colour illustrations, and sidebar glossaries a bit encyclopedia-like, although in my view these features help to provide a fairly rounded glimpse of life for both Natives and Europeans during the early sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The strength of these stories is that they challenge the idea of the contact between Europeans and First Nations as monolithic and one-way, with "civilized" Western nations always maintaining the upper hand. *Blackships*, for example, depicts the Iroquois as strong, independent people who recognized that their world was rapidly changing with the arrival of the French and took active steps to protect their lands, resources, and sovereignty.

The book has a few weak spots, however. As Aboriginal authors such as Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and Jeannette Armstrong have suggested, using Aboriginal traditions and themes in the work of those who are outside First Nations cultures is problematic. Jon C. Stott and Roderick McGillis have made similar observations in the context of children's literature (see works cited). Though well intentioned, *Blackships and Thanadelthur* does not represent Aboriginal peoples and cultures in ways that avoid inaccuracies, stereotypes, and clichés. In *Blackships*, for example, Domagaya's playful remark to Taigoagny, that his brother "look[s] like the Trickster," seems out of place given that the Iroquois do not have a figure who is comparable to such familiar Trickster personalities as "Weesageechak" in Cree, "Nanabush" in Ojibway, "Coyote" in Blackfeet, and "Raven" in Haida and others. The need for increased cultural sensitivity — and historical accuracy — is underscored by the use of an identical sidebar glossary definition of the Trickster in both *Blackships* and *Thanadelthur*, that is, in both Iroquois and Cree contexts. Further, this

definition describes the Trickster as male, when in fact these characters are noted for their ability not only to change shapes but to cross genders. In depicting a generic view of an essentially diverse and vibrant figure — one whom authors such as Louis Bird and Tomson Highway described as having as much importance in Aboriginal spirituality as Jesus Christ in Christian mythology — this book encourages a lack of differentiation among Native traditions. This lack of cultural specificity is a serious drawback when we consider that Canada's First Peoples exist today in some 608 bands in about 2,600 reserve communities as well as in numerous urban environments, and are, as such, highly heterogeneous peoples.

Several stereotypes and clichés further detract from the quality of this work: the silent stoicism of Taignoagny's mother, who dies a painful death yet makes no sound; the "fierce battle-scarred" chief Agona and the "withered" war chief Teandewiata, whose words "fell as softly as leaves"; several rousing as-long-as-the-waters-flow-type speeches; and lastly here, the depiction of Thanadelthur, a "mystery" dressed in buckskin and fur, blinking "with her doe-dark eyes." Such heavily romanticized images have little place in sophisticated contemporary writing on Aboriginal peoples and issues and should certainly be avoided in works for children and juveniles.

Overall, *Blackships and Thanadelthur* is a useful resource for juvenile audiences insofar as it imagines contact from the viewpoint of the colonized, challenges the dominant image of Aboriginals as a conquered, passive peoples, and highlights some of the important ways that young First Nations people actively shaped both their own and Canada's history. Several inaccuracies and stereotypes do, however, undermine what is otherwise a good book. In my experience, young audiences appreciate culturally specific materials that teach them about the diversity of Aboriginal peoples in ways that avoid generic, stereotypical images. Hopefully volume two in the Young Heroes of North America series will be even more successful in this respect.

Works Cited

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