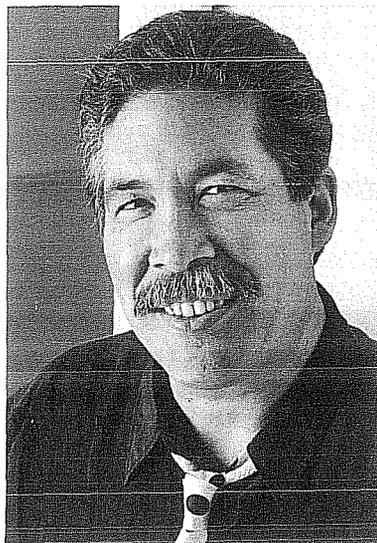


Parable, Parody, or “Blip in the Canadian Literary Landscape”: Tom King on *A Coyote Columbus Story*

Marie C. Davis

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue, Thomas King parle de l'accueil de son premier livre illustré, *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Il évoque l'importance qu'il a accordée à la tradition orale, à la critique de l'histoire officielle, à la dimension symbolique et parodique du récit afin de montrer l'envers du voyage de Christophe Colomb.



Summary: In this interview, Thomas King discusses the reception of his first picture book, as well as its oral quality, its vision of history and time, the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage, and the book's status as both parable and parody.

In spite of its having been nominated for a Governor General's Award in 1992, and in spite of the critical acclaim with which it met, Tom King and Kent Monkman's *A Coyote Columbus Story* hasn't become the "classic" critics thought it would. Its sales have been slack and, as Joan Weller points out, librarians in her branch are not having a hard time keeping it on the shelves: "A good picture book will circulate 20 to 30 times or more in a year. *A Coyote Columbus Story* has only circulated 29 times in the last *four* years out of all the Ottawa-area libraries." Turning to reviews for an explanation of the book's seeming lack of deserved success does not help. Practically everything that has been said in print about the book has been panegyric: the beautiful prose, unique narrative voice, the hilarious plot, wonderfully bizarre colours, crazy characters, and fitting illustrations — all have received loud applause. And yet the book has been, to some extent, forgotten. Why? Mary Collis, the National Library's Children's Literature Librarian, voices an opinion shared by many: though she herself liked the book, she knows "it left many readers feeling ill at ease." And Patsy Aldana, publisher of Groundwood Books, concurs: when she brought it to the 1992 Bologna Book Fair, it was snubbed. One US publisher called it "hateful" (Aldana); another said it contained "depressing news" (Ross); and one British publisher snickered that it was "about as far as it could be" from the kind of book his company published.¹ It wasn't just the angle on Columbus (presumably the "depressing news") that disturbed these publishers, but the very

strangeness of the characters and narrative voice — not to mention the garish illustrations. Aldana argues that “in Europe and in England, the notion of an authentic [Native] voice is not of particular interest. No American publisher wanted *Coyote Columbus Story*. They didn’t like it. The US tends to like only a *pretty* version of an authentic voice.”

But does *Coyote Columbus*’ publishing and circulation history tell us anything different about the likes of Canadians? Perhaps only that we have reacted with bewilderment more than revulsion or incuriosity. As Sarah Ellis puts it, “It’s not that we look at this book and say clearly, ‘This isn’t the truth. This isn’t history. This is a lie. We’re going to reject it.’ Our reaction is more like, ‘What?’” She adds that there are two other reasons for the poor reception of *Coyote Columbus*. First, it may not be immediately accessible to non-Natives: “It is easier and more comfortable to encounter another culture mediated through your own. We used to have Native stories re-written by white people. It was a stage we had to go through. We keep saying now that we’re through that stage and that we want other voices and other perspectives. But maybe we don’t when it comes right down to it. Maybe we want Columbus to discover America again.” Second, at some level, many readers seem to believe that children’s literature should be read without effort: “though we may expect to have to work a bit to understand adult literature, many people think children’s literature doesn’t need intellectual fibre. So, we might expect to have to learn something about Milton’s language and culture in order to appreciate his poetry, but we don’t extend the same criteria to the language and culture of a modern children’s book — even if it belongs to a tradition we may not find accessible.

To anyone who works in the field of children’s literature, this prejudice is tiresomely familiar. Jeffrey Canton, Program Coordinator of the Canadian Children’s Book Centre in Toronto, still winces when he encounters it, especially with a book like *A Coyote Columbus Story*, a “gutsy story” that we should “admire for its outrageousness”: “Children’s Lit people have to start screaming, ‘This book is not just for children!’ Like Paul Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain*, *A Coyote Columbus Story* is a book that adults of fine literary sensibility can revel in. We’ve created this ghetto into which we’ve put *children’s* literature, as if thinking adults are above it, and then find that books like *Coyote Columbus Story* and *Tales from Gold Mountain* don’t even fit in that ghetto. So, they get lost. *Coyote Columbus* is not explicitly an adult book; it’s not really a young people’s book, and it’s certainly not a picture book for pre-schoolers. So where does it fit in? I think we have to break down those category barriers surrounding children’s literature and *Coyote Columbus* is the perfect book for doing that. We have to learn to say more loudly that if we’re going to call something *children’s* literature then we have to also say that children’s literature doesn’t have to be nice.”

But Canton also acknowledges that it’s not just that people don’t expect to have to think much when they come to children’s literature; some people were left feeling uneasy about *Coyote Columbus*’s view of history: “We can criticize

some traditions but not others. It's okay for us to turn fairy tales upside down but — hey — let's not turn history upside-down. When people came across *Coyote Columbus*, they seemed to be thinking, 'What? Columbus isn't a folk hero? There will be an uprising in Tampa!' I think we're missing the point. If we want authors from a particular tradition to tell their stories, and if that means that that author is going to tell a story we might recognize, and stand it on its head, then we have to be prepared for that. I don't know of many books, especially American ones, that treat Native legends with anything less than reverence. And writers like C.J. Taylor, Joe McLellan and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias don't reflect the broad humour in Native culture — the humour that we see in the adult works of Thomson Highway and Tom King. So, a lot of people weren't prepared for *Coyote Columbus's* tone. But the problems with its reception shouldn't be blamed on the book. The book is a work of art."

Like Canton and Ellis, many of the writers, critics and librarians I spoke to about the book said it is one of the best ever produced in this country, but that it does require some mediation if we're going to appreciate it more fully. Canton recommends an afterword in which King explains who Coyote is; he also suggests that it would work brilliantly in a high school Canadian history class.

My own experience teaching *A Coyote Columbus Story* two years in a row (1995 & 1996) to large classes of children's literature students at The University of Western Ontario proved the need for the substantial mediation of the book that Canton, Ellis and others acknowledge it seems to require. I lectured on the tale's oral voice; its vision of accepted history and its historical base; its portrait of Coyote and the community, and so on. I even read it aloud. But many students found themselves unable to shake their initial bewilderment. I used this experience as a basis for the following [summer 1996] discussion with Tom King.

DAVIS: I put *Coyote Columbus Story* on a course in children's literature I was teaching at the University of Western Ontario because I loved it, but I found that the students didn't really like it; many said they didn't get it and I was disturbed by that. It raised a lot of questions about what they expected from the text and so what I would like to do is ask you some of the questions they asked. Also, I have another agenda and that is that *CCL* is putting together an issue on historical fiction for children and *Coyote Columbus Story* touches on an interesting aspect of traditional history, and really puts a kink in it.

KING: The part nobody knows, it seems like, from the reviews that I got.²

DAVIS: The first question I wanted to ask you about was the oral quality of the piece. The tale works beautifully when you read it aloud with children, as I am sure you know, not just in its sentence fragments or the conversational tics, like "you know," but in its grammar — "they says," "they do that" and its reliance on the present tense. There is also the narrator's intrusions like "stick around, big trouble is going to come along. I can tell you that" and so on. Can you tell me the significance of that oral quality?

KING: I spent some time trying out voice pieces even before I wrote *Coyote Columbus* — some of those are in my short story collection — and I could not for the life of me get an oral voice to materialize out of that written word; I couldn't make the voice come alive. The break for me came when I was putting together an anthology of native writing and I received several pieces from an Okanagan storyteller named Harry Robinson. Those stories were amazing because Robinson had been able to do that: he had been able to create an oral voice in a brilliant piece of work, and I was able to look at Robinson's piece for clues. I couldn't write like he wrote, but I could come close -- and once I saw his, then I saw what the tricks were. Robinson went on to write two collections of his own work. Frankly, I stole from Robinson — you know, watched what he did and adapted it to my own work.

DAVIS: Which book of Robinson's?

KING: One's called *Write it on Your Heart*, and there is another one called *Nature Power*.

DAVIS: So, what did you steal, the repetition, or ...?

KING: Well, the repetition I knew about already. I had done my PhD work partly on oral stories so I had an academic background in oral stories as well as just a personal one, so I knew about repetition. I knew about particular kinds of rhythm that you can come up with, but that wasn't the key thing all by itself. One of the things Robinson's stories had in them, even when he was talking about serious stuff, was he was good-natured about it, and he remembered always that his audience was a part of the story — that he wasn't telling the story *to* people, he was simply participating in the story and he happened to be the one who was leading the participation, if you will.

DAVIS: So, there aren't other voices in the story.

KING: No, there's just his voice as the narrator. I mean, he has other voices in terms of people talking — he'll say "so and so said something" — but it is more or less a first-person narration. Robinson also demonstrated to me the way in which you could vary those rhythms to where it became — I think it was Edgar Allen Poe who once suggested that poetry should aspire to the quality of music, and Robinson's piece did that for me. There was rhythm to it, a very firm rhythm, and so I began paying attention to that more than to the story, because if you read Robinson's stories the damn things go all over the place and at the end you're left with a tonal piece almost and it doesn't have to make sense particularly, and doesn't have to link everything up. But being able to hear the voices is so powerful that he overcomes some of the mishaps that the fiction itself has.

DAVIS: That's just what I have noticed in your own work — there is a kind of weight, if you will, to your sentences. You'll just say "well." What's implied in you saying "well" is that there's somebody listening, and that you like that audience and they like you and they are in on this story with you. That's unusual.

KING: I think, for me at least, the most important thing — I mean there are a lot of writers who like to touch your mind as a reader — you get into them and

you think, “Oh my God, boy that’s just wonderful to think about that; the logic is just overwhelming, blah blah blah.” But for me, that part of the mind is not what I am really interested in particularly. I am interested in that part of your mind that we call the imagination and in that regard the worst thing that you can do as a storyteller, I think, is to give the reader too much, to the point where your imagination does not get engaged. My great gripe with television is that it leaves nothing to the imagination, and most of the movies that I’ve seen leave nothing to the imagination. As a matter of fact, if they are mysteries, I take a great deal of pride figuring the damn things out in about the first fifteen minutes, because you just know what’s going to happen in the end, and it puts me to sleep. It dulls my anticipation and it dulls my appreciation of the piece. There was a movie I just saw called *Dead Man* with Johnny Depp and Gary Farmer, which was wonderful from my standpoint, because it made no sense whatsoever. The plot wasn’t the important thing — it was just simply watching these two men and imagining what it must have been like to be there with them. So, for me, whenever I write I try to get that imagination engaged. I’m not big on plot, particularly, and I’m not big on time, and what I really am looking at is simply stimulating the imagination and letting the reader sort of take over. J.R.R. Tolkien does a lot of that in *The Hobbit*. In the end, I don’t know what those critters look like particularly — they’ve got hairy feet — and I really don’t care. It’s not what I look for in the characters. It’s things like Gollum, that creature who speaks in first person about himself and the magic of that voice. Those are the things I look for.

DAVIS: This is one of the things that my students have trouble with, though — the seeming plotlessness of *Coyote Columbus*, and the implied audience. They can feel that the audience is there in the rhythm of the text itself, but they don’t know how you do that.

KING: The first thing, I guess, you have to get is that a book like *Coyote Columbus* was written exclusively as a voice piece. It wasn’t written to be read — I mean read in your mind, which is the way most of us read our books. It was meant to be read out loud. If you try to read it silently to yourself, it’s just going to fall flat. It really exists in the sphere of the spoken word.

DAVIS: So are you trying to deliberately duplicate a storytelling situation?

KING: I am trying to deliberately duplicate the sound of the storyteller, and the storyteller’s situation maybe to some degree, but most of all I am concerned about the *voice*, and that voice that anticipates the audience and anticipates some of the questions and knows enough about the storytelling, one would hope, that you can keep the person interested as the story goes along. So, a lot of times you have those asides, those pauses; you have those rhythms that develop and that repetition that comes along — repetitions are an easy way to remember a story. In *Coyote Columbus* situations are repeated. Each time Coyote goes to ask for the animals to play ball, they all do the same thing -- you know, they all say “no” and do something else — and so you anticipate already that Coyote is finally going to find somebody who does want to play ball with him, and probably with

disastrous results, and that is exactly what happens. So, it's an old formula. Certainly, the only thing new, I suppose, is that I try to create it orally rather than in that written world.

DAVIS: One of the things that surprised me about my little niece is that she had memorized the line about how Coyote sings her song, and dances her dance, and thinks so hard her nose falls off; and she'll repeat that to you as if it's part of her skin.

KING: Yes. It's kind of a mantra, I suppose, and oral literature has those within it. There's no way that you could — as a Navaho, for instance — that you could memorize something like The Blessing Way, a healing ceremony, that's very long and goes on for days and days and days. There is no way to memorize that unless you have those kinds of devices of rhythms and patterns in the piece itself, that allow you to keep coming back to familiar ground then moving off from there.

DAVIS: Tell me about Coyote. Who is Coyote and why did you make her female?

KING: Well, I like doing things like that. I've got a seven-year-old daughter. We have to go through some of the books and put "she" and "her" in there because most books are all "he, he, he, he." It is true that nowadays you get more "she's," but a lot of the older books are male front-end loaded, as it were, and Coyote within oral literature doesn't particularly have a determined sex. It is true that many of the oral stories list Coyote as "he," but those are translations, and translations by non-Natives, so who knows? But Coyote changes — the tricksters change sex, for instance — they often get pregnant and have kids. There's no rhyme or reason to that. The trickster is kind of a ubiquitous character and in a real sense I suppose the trickster is, philosophically at least, genderless.

So, for me it just made sense that since everything else in this world was sort of white male patriarchy, that a female Coyote wouldn't be a bad idea. And I tend to do that anyway — I mean I don't call myself subversive particularly, but I live with a staunch feminist and when I start "he, he, heing" she goes "Hey, wait a minute!"

DAVIS: It made sense to me that Coyote is not gendered, only because in the old tales, as you say, he or she does end up getting pregnant, but also does the impregnating at other times, so it's kind of confusing.

KING: Oh yeah, she can be hermaphroditic sometimes.

DAVIS: Coyote's nose. Why does it fall off?

KING: Coyote can do almost anything. He carries his penis around in a box to keep it out of trouble, because it's got, quote "a mind of its own!" He gets stomped on, it comes back; parts of his body fall off; he eats parts of his body; sometimes he turns his liver into a good-looking woman so he can have intercourse. The beauty of Coyote is that nothing is beyond the bounds of that particular critter — and in that regard he's very human. [laughter] The archetypal figure itself is really kind of a super-human figure, if you will. He really is meant as a caution, I think, in large part.

DAVIS: So, he's an object lesson.

KING: Yes, as we watch Coyote, so we know what good behaviour and

mischievous behaviour are and some of the things we can and can't do. Certainly, he was used as that.

DAVIS: So are you using Coyote as a sort of god figure or as a figure of chaos, or...?

KING: No, I never use Coyote as a god figure. That would be eviscerating Coyote. Coyote isn't a god-like figure at all. Coyote is a trickster. It's a mistake that people make all the time: They think that if Coyote can do all these things that he must be God. Actually, I had some fun with that in *Green Grass Running Water*, one of my novels. Coyote really is one of the creative forces in the world and one of the destructive forces in the world. There is imbalance — or a balance — and it goes on with Coyote all the time. The ground is always shifting out from underneath you with the trickster, whereas with anything that resembles God you have this sense that it's benevolent -- one -- and everything it does is right — number two — and it can create anything or think anything or be anywhere with impunity. And that's not Coyote. Coyote is a creature of appetites, of gross appetites.

DAVIS: Gross appetites?

KING: Gross appetites: sexual appetites, appetites for food, appetites for mischief ...

DAVIS: And fun and baseball.

KING: Yes, all those things. Appetites for screwing up, major league.

DAVIS: Like the figure in "The One about Coyote Going West"?

KING: Yes! They did a radio play of that. The sound effects man had a great day. I think it was 42 different kinds of farts that he made. And they actually broadcast the darned thing on the air late at night so as not to offend many of CBC's faithful listeners. I mean, you didn't want to listen to it while you were eating.

DAVIS: And I missed it! Okay, so Coyote is a force, a force of destruction, and a force of, of creativity, at the same time?

KING: And a force of mischief. If you think of Coyote as being made up a series of overweening appetites that's probably as close to Coyote as you get. I would never try to define Coyote. It's hard enough just working with the critter.

DAVIS: But when you deal with the issue of who Coyote is you inevitably have to deal with her god-like promises. Coyote promises the human beings and the animals, for instance, that she'll take back Christopher Columbus and she says everything will be balanced again — "I promise." Of what does that balance consist?

KING: Well, it's not a matter that Coyote ever strikes the balance. I mean, she understands that balance is necessary in the world, but it's hard to maintain that and Coyote is always her own worst enemy in that regard. I mean if she took Christopher Columbus back, there might be an even larger disaster looming on the horizon because of that. She creates Christopher Columbus, she puts him in motion, and she can't take it back. There's a wonderful scene in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (Silko is a Laguna Pueblo writer), where the witches have this contest to see who can tell the scariest story, and the one who tells the scariest story is

the one who brings that story into being in the telling. As she tells it, the story comes to life and she can't take it back.

DAVIS: So the word is the creation.

KING: Yes, which is what N. Scott Momaday works with in *House Made of Dawn*. The biggest thing about Coyote is that she is not infinite. She creates Christopher Columbus; she can't get rid of him. She'd like to, maybe, but she can't, so what she does is she makes the best of a bad deal.

DAVIS: And tries to get him to play baseball?

KING: And tries to get him to play baseball — to lighten up, and have a sense of humour. And he doesn't. He winds up running off with Indians to Seville to sell them as slaves. And has she learned her lesson? Absolutely not! You know, along comes Jacques Cartier and the whole thing begins to kick off again.

DAVIS: That's where plotlessness comes in, which is unusual in children's literature. We end where we began, with Coyote asking Jacques Cartier this time to play ball.

KING: Exactly. Mind you, Coyote is a microcosm of the real world. We don't learn anything either. As much as we take a great deal of pride in our brains, and our ideas of progress — I think it was General Electric that had as their motto for years and years "Progress is our most important product" — we still don't have much sense of ourselves, or of the world in which we live, and the only thing we do when we discover we have made a mistake is to sort of throw up our hands in despair and go make another one. So, in that regard I suppose Coyote is as much a commentary on the world we live in and ourselves as she is anything else. I mean some people look at her and say "Oh, the trickster figure, boy that's funny," but in some ways we are no better and no worse than Coyote.

DAVIS: So, Coyote is ultimately extremely human?

KING: Yes. Was it today they accused somebody in British Columbia, a principal of a school, of creating pornography with young boys and girls out there? And, you know, when I heard that news, I looked at Coyote and said, "that's what Coyote would do." It's the kind of thing he/she would get involved in. I mean Coyote was either created by humans to be a caution against these types of appetites or she created humans in her own image and they wound up with vestiges of those appetites. Either story works for me.

DAVIS: So, when you are talking about balance you are talking about some sense of cosmic balance between creative and destructive forces in the universe?

KING: Yes, but it's not God and the Devil. Those are cosmic forces that are at polar opposites to each other. There's that whole sense within Judeo-Christianity that good will triumph over evil — actually *must* triumph over evil — and that evil must be destroyed. And the more evil is destroyed the better world you are going to have, which is a rather foolish kind of thing, and it's got us into all sorts of trouble. For instance, we know that bacteria are bad so we spend a lot of time and money and years of research killing off bacteria. Now, we discover that having killed off those bacteria, they've turned around and come back, and we have no

immunity to them at all, and no way to treat them. Lucien Bouchard loses his leg to flesh-eating bacteria we haven't seen before; we've got viruses now that are kicking around that are nigh impossible to control. And even polio, in the guise of post-polio syndrome, is making a comeback, for crying out loud. So, just as we think that we've got our world under control here, and we are moving along to a better and a more beautiful future, we wind up in the same pooh as we were before.

And a lot of oral stories speak to that. There are all sorts of stories where somebody tries to get rid of mosquitoes, for instance, and in so doing they upset the balance of the world and the whole thing falls apart. Most of the oral stories that I know about that deal in any way with this issue of balance really do try to look for that balancing point, that sort of centre point between mischief and good, and they don't spend a lot of time trying to kill off evil. They acknowledge its existence and they go on with their lives. Now we don't do that (by "we" I mean the world of humans). We are always trying to change our environment; we are always not happy with the way things are.

DAVIS: Or we're trying to convert other people to our point of view.

KING: Yes. We certainly do that a lot. And then we kill them off if they don't convert. [laughter]

DAVIS: But, I mean this quite seriously. If you have a vision of the world where things are balanced, rather than where one must overtake the other, then perhaps the desire to impose on or convert other people is not as strong.

KING: Well, it probably isn't, but, of course, we don't do that. There's too much evidence to the contrary in the world, everything from the war among the Moslems themselves in the Middle East, to the battles that get fought in Eastern Europe — some of these are religious, some are economic, some are political — but the point is there is always that sense that there is a standard against which you measure everybody else and if they don't conform, well, you've got ways to deal with that! So Coyote is, I suppose, in all of that, and I don't know that Coyote strives for balance so much because what happens is that even though Coyote may know about the need for balance in the world, every time he tries to do good, or do bad, his appetites just overwhelm him. Our appetites, whether they be sexual, whether they be simply physical kinds of appetites, whether they be political appetites, economic appetites, or simply just class appetites — the one I like best of all — those will always get in the way.

DAVIS: What do you mean, class appetites?

KING: The need to get wealthy and get ahead. At the same time, the need to make sure that if you are in a particular class, you don't bother with people who aren't: make sure you're always looking up, you're never looking down, or even sideways. That was a very 1950s kind of attitude, but it certainly sprung up hard and heavy in the '80s again. And it seems to me like representational art. We may pooh pooh it and sort of say, "yeah, well it's easy enough for a woodchuck to look like a woodchuck on a piece of canvas," but we still go out and buy our Robert Batemans and we ignore other artists who are far more imaginative and creative. We really

have very little training in stuff that leans on the imagination. Kids are better at it than we are, but that is not surprising. Look at the pictures that kids paint. I mean, Joan Miro certainly looked at pictures that kids paint when he was doing his stuff and was able to tap that kind of imagination. Even the literature. People read writers like Tom Clancy, and stuff that is pretty predictable, pretty straightforward.

DAVIS: This is one of the problems that my students have with your texts — that is, that they are not straightforward and linear, that they have a different vision of time. You know, Columbus and Cartier enter a world of toasters and nail polish. What's the vision of time behind it?

KING: The vision of time is that there really isn't any such thing. In my world, I really don't pay close attention to time. There's no reason why I can't have toasters at the same time that Columbus was coming over here because it doesn't make any difference.

DAVIS: Why doesn't it make any difference?

KING: Because time itself is ultimately flexible. We do with time as we will. In most ways, time hasn't changed us as a race — we are still as ruthless and benevolent as we always have been. We may live a little longer, but we get a lot more diseases. If you took me, here in the twentieth century, and somebody from, let's say, the fourteenth century in North America, I doubt that our lives would be particularly different — our toys would be, but the basic emotions, the basic needs, the basic concerns, haven't changed at all.

DAVIS: That's interestingly put. Human nature hasn't really changed, it's just the gadgets.

KING: Human nature hasn't changed. It's just that you can tell — I guess that old saying "you can tell the men from the boys by the price of their toys" is one that you could use for history, too. What's really changed are the toys. And in some ways we are in worse shape now than we were before because we have got toys that we can't control.

DAVIS: We've got toys that blow up other toys?

KING: That's right. It is one thing to have two hundred people armed with clubs who beat each other over the head — or beat the ground and put on a display and decide who is going to win territory without a drop of blood being shed — and something completely different to have people in Russia who let Chernobyl melt down and then have no idea what to do about it after it happens. Or Three Mile Island. So, basically it is just our toys.

DAVIS: Your vision basically transcends all of that — the chronological, linear conception of time, that history validates all the time?

KING: Yes. I throw in shopping centres and malls into fifteenth century North America.

DAVIS: And Caribbean cruises.

KING: Maybe the Caribbean cruise really was just a walk in the woods, or maybe it was a camping trip or something. Maybe it was a berry-picking expedition. What I try to do is to tie the past with the present, so that if a kid sees

an Indian village in the fifteenth century and sees that they have a television set, I think it pulls them in closer to that group rather than allowing them to stand back and think of it as an historical anomaly.

DAVIS: And you are trying to suggest that whatever the Indians then had was the equivalent perhaps to them of the television?

KING: Yes. And it also means that you can reach out as a reader and be a part of that world because in that world there are things that you really *don't* know about, but there are things that you *do* know about. And so it helps you to make that leap. Otherwise, you just sort of stand back on the sidelines and you say, "well, that's the way things were way back then." And that actually creates a distance that I don't want to create, particularly in my fiction. I mean, I do it — I am not so clever that I can keep track of it all the time — but it certainly is something that I try to put into my fiction.

DAVIS: It's funny that the children to whom I have read your story are not the least bit disturbed about this fracturing of time — what would traditionally be seen as a distortion of time. But some of the university students I teach would say to me that not only were they disturbed by the "poor English" in your book, but by the lack of regard for history.

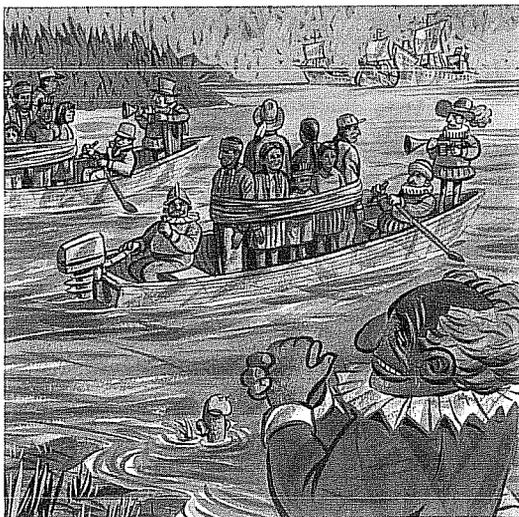
KING: Well, that's where the joke really is. That just tickles me pink! I sat down with a reviewer out in — it might have been Saskatchewan some place, but I'm not sure, it was a long time ago — and she took me to task for rewriting history. I said "well, what do you mean?" and she says, "well," she says, "I know that you make some of the stuff up and I know some of the stuff is real history," she says, "but you know when you go and make something up and pass it off as real history, I think you do the reader a disservice," and I said, "where was that?" and she said "well, she said, "Christopher Columbus, whether or not he discovered North America," -- and of course he doesn't, he discovers the Caribbean area — "to turn him into an enslaver of Indians is fairly outrageous," and I said "look, that is the only part of the book that *is* historically factual" and I give her a history lesson: that Columbus makes four voyages over a year and from the first voyage on he is sending back Indians to the slave markets in Seville, and that's not made up, I said — and the second voyage he sent — he had fifteen ships I think — and sent back hundreds ...

DAVIS: On his second voyage?

KING: On his second voyage, yes -- the first voyage only had three ships -- and he sent back nine Indians — well, maybe eight, maybe ten — but you know a number of Indians get back to the court of Spain.

DAVIS: Are they used as slaves?

KING: No, actually, from what I can gather from the historical record only two of them survived, because supposedly they come back with him on the second voyage to act as interpreters. They have been schooled in Catholic manners and Catholic religion and supposedly the first Indian that Columbus sets free he puts in a boat and lets him row ashore and the idea is the guy's going to go back into the woods and bring all his friends and neighbours out and tell them what great



guys the Spanish are, and what he does is he gets on shore, takes off all the clothes that the Spanish have given him and disappears. [laughter] I love that story!

The second guy they sort of kept on close tether — a chain, I think it was. But on the second voyage, Columbus comes over with — maybe it's seventeen ships, but in any case he has all these ships — and he begins sending back five hundred Indians in a pop to the markets of Seville and they are sold as slaves along with the North Africans, and the only reason that the slave trade didn't keep going in the New World particularly was (1) the Africans were easy to get, just because Spain is right there. You've got the Moors, you've got Algiers, you've got the North Coast of Africa that you can begin picking up slaves from. It wasn't hard to get in. Those routes were known, those were well-established sailing routes by the time Christopher Columbus sailed for North America; and (2) the Indians tended to die off *en masse* when they got to the Old World because it was filthy over there. It was absolutely, horribly filthy.

But the thing that fascinated me was that this one particular woman, who was giving me a bad time, just didn't know her history, and so she assumed that I had made that part up when, in actual fact, I had made up the rest of it, but not that.

I make no bones about the fact that I wanted to turn the screws down a little bit in the piece. I wanted to make it funny but I also wanted to say "look, this is a historical record, and it doesn't get talked about much, and you may not like it, so what I am going to do is, I am going to try to make it funny" — but I am hoping that by the time you get to the scenes where the Indians are all bound up on the boat and shipped off to Spain ...

DAVIS: Did that really happen, that they were bound?

KING: Yes. Oh yes. I mean, not like that: on a motor boat with their arms tied.

DAVIS: No, but you didn't say that in the text; that's Monkman's interpretation.
KING: No, the thing that happened was, they were simply captured and loaded onto the ships and away they went, because those voyages were expensive; somebody had to pay for them. I mean you could almost hear Mike Harris talking there at the court of Spain. You know: "We can't have these things without having them pay for themselves, blah blah blah".

One of the criticisms I got fairly regularly was that it was a mean-spirited book and not meant for kids at all.

DAVIS: How do you feel about that?

KING: Well, I can see, given the run of children's books — especially the pastel parade that winds up under my nose every so often at the bookstore — I can see that as a concern. I mean if you are talking about *Amos's Sweater* and *Coyote Columbus*, then *Coyote Columbus* certainly has a bigger set of teeth than poor old Amos the sheep who loses his wool and has to have a sweater knitted for him. I couldn't take a steady diet of my kind of stuff, and the new kids' books that I am writing aren't like that particularly — they're still oral voice pieces but they're not as politically loaded. But one of the things was that that book was written for a particular point in time and a particular audience. This was the quincentennial of the Columbus voyage and every Native writer in the entire world got calls from publishers to see if they wanted to do something on Christopher Columbus, and a lot of us were asked to do historical pieces, you know blah blah, then-and-now kind of thing, and I said "no, it doesn't interest me." Finally, Greenwood books came along and said "make it a kid's book" and I thought, "well, I've not done that before; sure, why not?" But I wanted to do something that was pointed. I wanted to do a piece where the kids would say to their parents, "did that really happen?" I don't see why you can't ask those kinds of questions. Hell, some of the books that my kids like the best of all are Robert Munsch's Fart books.

DAVIS: [Laughter]. *Good Families Don't*.

KING: I know Munsch took all sorts of hell for that book.

DAVIS: Yes, that and *Giant*, as well, for making God into a little girl.

KING: Yes. But I really like Munsch. I mean, Munsch has a sense of humour that I quite appreciate.

DAVIS: Yes, it's irreverent — a little like yours.

KING: But it is to the point, too, because we keep creating these unreal kinds of realities where little boys win. But, *The Paper Bag Princess* and those kinds of things, I quite enjoy. They make me laugh; they make my kids laugh.

But the thing that I object to most of all is that the minute Native writers began writing about non-Native history and literature and doing so in a particularly subversive manner, the call went out for a level playing field. Let's be fair and play fair, the establishment suggested, as if equality or fair play was ever a part of non-native writing. Part of this "request" is for us to forget the past and begin again as if the last four hundred years of writing and government policy never occurred. The other part of the "request" is for Native writers (and writers from other groups as

well) to agree that these “difficulties” and “mistakes” are part of the past, when, in fact, they are very much a part of our present and promise to be a part of our future. Well, I say let’s kick the grass up a little bit, let us tear some hunks off people first — then we’ll talk about a level playing field.

DAVIS: That’s interesting that you say that, because one of the TAs on my course had a student who was arguing that *Coyote Columbus Story* was racist against the Spanish.

KING: [Laughter]. Oh God. Do I ever say “Spanish” in the book at all? I think I have them go to Spain in the end because that’s exactly where it goes, but I could have had them go to La La Land — I should have done that, maybe.

DAVIS: I hadn’t expected *Coyote Columbus* to cause such a ruckus in the classroom.

KING: I’m glad it did, actually.

DAVIS: Part of it was based in ignorance of history and then ignorance of Coyote.

KING: That’s okay, I don’t mind either one of those ignorances because it’s sort of like turning over a rock; you think everything’s fine until you kick over a rock and find all this nasty stuff underneath and it reminds you that the *area* has not been dealt with at all.

DAVIS: It is true, though, that a lot of the students feel as though they generally understand Native issues and yet when you give them this tale, they’re not sure what to do with it.

KING: They’ll like my second children’s book more; it’s not as “in-their-face” as the first one is. *Coyote Columbus* didn’t sell very well either. I mean, it was nominated for a GG [Governor General’s] award — but in the end it really never sold and it never was sold overseas or even in the States because they found it much too heavy. There were agents and publishing companies that read the book and were outraged by it.

DAVIS: Outraged by what, the portrait of Columbus and Cartier?

KING: What they saw as a mean spirit. You know, it was the quincentennial; it seemed like it was just a plain slam on Christopher Columbus. Nobody, at least not at that level, seemed to realize that this was a kind of *parable* if you will, or even a *parody*, for that matter, that it reached backwards and forwards, or maybe they *did* realize that and didn’t like that fact. As long as you can keep something in the past, you can say “I was not a part of that; I don’t subscribe to it; I am not a part of the problem that created those situations,” and in many ways *Coyote Columbus* is suggesting that those situations continue to come up because the same attitudes are still there in the end.

DAVIS: And it continues to break apart communities, which is what happens in the end. That’s the tragedy in the story.

KING: Yes. What’s different from the real Columbus story and the Arawaks in the Caribbean and the Davis Inlet people or even, or even to go back further in history, to the Trail of Tears down in the States between the five civilized tribes, or even to the break-up of the Indian reservations into different groups here in

Canada. Those things are not in our distant past, and so maybe the people who didn't like the book at that level, who should have been intelligent enough to see where it was going, maybe one reason they didn't like it was that it was a reminder that these things are still happening. I can take almost any event in history that affects Native people and come down to the present day and say "well, here's a parallel, right here" without much difficulty. Lubicon Lake Cree was just wonderful; they never have settled that thing, partly because sometimes the Province would agree with the Lubicon but the Federal Government wouldn't and then the Feds would but the Province wouldn't and also they were playing little games with the tribe.

DAVIS: Isn't the UN, though, to some extent getting involved in all of this?

KING: Oh no, the UN just sits around and picks their nose. I think the UN is a good idea but in terms of Native people, it gives us a forum for complaining about those things; we can go to Lake Geneva and bitch all we want about it.

DAVIS: But it still is Lake Geneva and ... Eurocentric.

KING: Yes. The fact of the matter is — and every so often somebody will declare something is Native month or — I mean this last year [laughter] we had Indian month or week or day, right? I forget when it was; it completely passed me by. There were some people that knew about it in the community but a lot of people had never heard of it before — and it just came out of nowhere. I was laughing for a day or so, I thought, "yeah, you know, Chretien gets up and says, 'we have to recognize the contribution of Native people,' and this is the same guy who in 1969 brought out the '69 White Paper which was the termination document for native people on reserves!"

DAVIS: That's not well-publicized, is it?

KING: Well, it was in '69, but our memory is only one election away, one election long. And nobody wants to hear about that particularly.

DAVIS: One of the things that I find really interesting in the text is the naiveté of the Natives versus the Europeans -- who are characterized as greedy people who commodify everything — but in particular what I end up thinking about is the reference to the bad manners of the Europeans — which seems so poignant. It's ironic understatement, is it not?

KING: Well, no, actually, there *is* a phrase among many groups that translates as something like "You act as though you have no relations."

DAVIS: What does that mean?

KING: It simply means that somebody is acting *as if* they had no mother, no father, no grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins: that they're not responsible to that larger and extended group; that they don't pay attention to their responsibilities and position within that group, and that they go off and act as though they're the only person in the world.

DAVIS: Isn't that what Coyote's doing?

KING: No, Coyote doesn't do that. It may look as though Coyote does, but Coyote is quite aware, I think, of that community and his/her responsibility to that community. I think, for me at least, I see those mistakes more within the

white Europeans who came over here. There is more of that sense of the individual; there's more of that sense of me against the world; there's more of that sense of "I've got mine and I don't give a damn if anyone else gets theirs." And we're able to cast off family pretty easily in this society.

DAVIS: Did Monkman's illustrations fit your expectations?

KING: Yes, they did. I wanted something that was brash and sort of in-your-face and in many ways neon. I did not want pretty illustrations; the story wasn't pretty. I didn't want something that was sort of pastels and fluff. The illustrations have to match the story. And I thought that Monkman did a good job.

DAVIS: You've got Elvis wearing pink stilettos ...

KING: Oh yes, I mean it's wild! When I first met Kent, he said, "How wild can I go?" I said "Kent, you can't be too wild with this kind of a story." So he went full board! One of the things that people said about the book, and this was not a good comment, was they had never seen anything like this before. They weren't sure what to do with it and the States said it was not upscale illustrations, or an upscale story. [Laughter] I think *A Coyote Columbus Story* is a sort of blip in the Canadian literary landscape. I'm not unhappy that it *is* that, or that it may be seen like that. I don't run around patting myself on the back saying, "What a subversive book," because there have been *more* subversive books than that one, but all in all, I was pleased with the way it turned out. I thought Greenwood did a great job. I just wish they'd make the money back.

DAVIS: Just one last question. When Coyote creates humans and then Columbus and so on, she sings her song and dances her dance and usually she thinks so hard that her nose falls off. But you explicitly state the second time she creates that she is not really paying attention to what she is doing — that's when she creates Columbus. What's implied there? That a figure like Columbus comes into the lives of these people because of a lack of vigilance or simply that "shit happens"?

KING: Shit happens. Yes. I mean, Coyote can't control it. She wants something else to happen. She doesn't want the side effect that she winds up with. She creates the animals; they're fine. But she can't control everything. That's the nice thing about the kind of stuff I like to work with — things happen. There doesn't have to be a logical reason for it happening; there doesn't have to be a way to stop it from happening because in actual fact you can't. It simply happens and you sort of do what you can.

DAVIS: So it's partly, then, a cautionary tale, about how you deal with what can happen, because Coyote doesn't really deal very well with Columbus.

KING: No, but Columbus is going to do what Columbus does anyway; there's no way to stop him once he is called into being. I suppose it's cautionary in the sense of "be careful what you ask for: you may get it." So, you need people to play baseball with, okay. But Attila the Hun arrives on your doorstep, and you say, "whoa, wait a minute, that wasn't what I asked for." It's sort of that monkey paw routine.

DAVIS: Why do you have Columbus acting as though he has the automatic right to commodify the animals and Indians? Is it simply because he assumes he's superior?

KING: Yes. What's important is the division between those worlds: one which is based on available economies and one which doesn't have those as a major feature. Columbus is not looking for Indians; he's not looking for new flora and fauna; he is simply looking for things that he can buy and sell. He wants gold from the Indies; he wants to find the Great Khan; if he can't find those, he wants to find myrtlewood, and incense, and gold and silver.

DAVIS: So, instead of saying, "wasn't Columbus a high-minded and spirited adventurer," you are saying, "Let's look at this from another angle" — Columbus was somebody who was looking for profit.

KING: Columbus *was* an adventurer. He was a marvellous sailor; he was a gutsy guy, and he had high moral standards, I suppose, for the day. He was a good Christian, as far as we can tell. It's just that that isn't all of Christopher Columbus; there is a side of Columbus that doesn't get shown particularly, the side that is shown to the natives of North America that nobody sees particularly. When I was in school, it was "In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue," and the quincennial just continued this; it was this great soporific outpouring of "Columbusism."

DAVIS: Which was embarrassing to a lot of people.

KING: Well, it was for me, but a lot of people loved it. But it gave us, it gave Native writers, Native activists, a great can to kick around for a couple of years. But now that it's gone, everybody's forgotten about it — just like my book. [Laughter]

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AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS/DISTINCTIONS

1992 Governor General's Award Nomination for *A Coyote Columbus Story*

1993 Governor General's Award Nomination for *Green Grass, Running Water*

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NOTES

- 1 This is the same company, as one anonymous *Globe and Mail* writer craftily points out, which published Hilaire Belloc's poem, "Matilda, Who Told Lies and Was Burned to Death": "The amusing illustrations, by Posy Simmonds, culminate in drawings of a raging inferno, with the text, 'For every time she shouted "Fire!" / They only answered "Little Liar!"'" The last page in the book shows Matilda's faithful pug dog crouched over the little girl's smouldering remains." ("Noises Off." *The Globe and Mail* 17 April 1992: C6.)
- 2 In another interview, King noted that no one actually *published* a review contesting his view

of history, but that this was mainly because reviewers interviewed him first and had their own notions of his supposed re-writing of history corrected. Personal interview. 31 Oct. 1996.

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