

### Riordan Enters Troubled Waters with *The Songs My Paddle Sings*

*The Songs My Paddle Sings: Native American Legends*. James Riordan. Illus. Michael Foreman. Pavilion Books, 1996. 128 pp. £14.99. ISBN 1-85793-244-7.

James Riordan, noted collector of folk tales, has assembled twenty North American Native legends which are beautifully illustrated by Michael Foreman. The selections in *The Songs My Paddle Sings* explain natural phenomena, describe creation and celebrate virtuous or heroic behaviour. Those interested in beautiful imagery will find it in pieces such as "Creation of the World." Other selections mirror more closely the oral discourse style of Native storytellers, better capturing the way in which legends are passed on.

Each of the twenty pieces is impressively illustrated with at least one full-page watercolour. Readers will find fine brushstrokes outlining simple characters or creating delicate details, with backdrops of broad strokes which allow the colours to bleed and the texture of the paper to add to the effect.

There is no question that these legends are artfully presented. It is not enough, however, to ask whether a legend has audience appeal or is suitably illustrated. The questions we need to ask relate to the political and social implications of using traditional oral narratives: Is it appropriate for legends to be used outside of the spiritual or didactic context for which they were intended? Is it acceptable to change legends so that they conform to mainstream standards? For Native author Daniel David Moses, there is no question: "I know Native legends but I really have a feeling that it's not my right to go traipsing around, telling other people's stories. This image of traditional Native storytelling places Native people in the museum with all the other extinct species" (Moses & Goldie xiii).

Riordan would disagree; "The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted," is printed below the copyright. This position, that an author has a right to publish the stories he chooses, for profit, is grounded in the idea that "cultures in a democratic society, including the stories that arise from them, are always rightfully subject to scrutiny" (Goebel 8).

Is Riordan, therefore, presenting these legends merely for profit? No, he has good intentions; in the introduction he bemoans the destruction of "the culture and civilization of Native American Indians" (8), and the silencing of their voices. He writes, "We cannot undo the past. But we can recognize the truth of history and thus help to right a dreadful wrong. We can also contribute by returning to the native peoples their own culture" (10).

Unfortunately, between the lines of these good intentions are serious assumptions about culture and power. Culture is not simply, as Riordan suggests, the material effects of a group of people. Culture is everything that is shared by members of the group: world view, attitudes, values, and belief systems, as well as objects, rituals and stories. It is not static; it is dynamic. It cannot be taken away or given back, certainly not by a non-Native. And even if it was possible to restore lost culture through the publication of

legends, why add this book to the already existing collections when nineteen of the twenty selections have been previously published? Why choose the words of Columbus to describe the virtues of Native people in the introduction? Why complain about the stereotyping of Natives, when the cover images reinforce those stereotypes? These are questions which Riordan must address if he wants to better understand how he can help to right a dreadful wrong.

Perhaps the most suitable piece of advice for Riordan can be found in the words of E. Pauline Johnson, Mohawk writer, to whom he paid tribute with his title. Five of Riordan's selections were taken from Johnson's own collection, *Legends of Vancouver*. One of these pieces begins, "I saw a legend coming, so I crept into the shell of single sounds" (21). Possibly the best Riordan can do is to choose to be silent, to choose to create the space in which Native people can decide, or decide not, to share their oral history.

### Works Cited

- Goebel, B. (1996). "Honoring Native Cultures: Reflections and Responsibilities." *Primary Voices* 4:3 (1996) 3-10.
- Moses, D.D., and T. Goldie., eds. *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992.
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### "Paddling in the Burn" with Robert Burns

*Auld Lang Syne*. Joanne Findon. Illus. Ted Nasmith. Stoddart Kids, 1997. 32 pp. \$18.95. ISBN 0-7737-30060.

On New Year's Eve, all around the world, people sing "Should auld acquaintance be forgot ... and the days of auld lang syne?" Let us hope that Joanne Findon's book, very attractively illustrated by Ted Nasmith, will give young readers an acquaintance with Robert Burns, the author of that world-famous song. Ted Nasmith's ancestor (the book jacket tells us) painted the haunting portrait of young Robert Burns, now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. The modern artist traces the stages of the poet's life, from birth on a poor tenant's farm, through golden days of childhood, "paddling in the burn," through romantic days with Bonnie Jean Armour, to fame as a "ploughman poet" welcomed to Edinburgh salons. The illustrations blend sensitively with Joanne Findon's first person narration about those "old times long-ago."

The only false note among the series of fine paintings, for me, was struck in a turgid picture of the young poet kneeling before a mystic wraith.