

Through Native Eyes

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Slave of the Haida, Doris Andersen. Illustrated by Muriel Wood. Macmillan, 1974. 166 pp. \$6.95 cloth.

Much of Canadian children's literature which draws on Indian experience and culture has restricted itself to the fertile and workable ground of retelling the folktales and legends which are accessible to us. Doris Andersen (not to be confused with Doris Anderson, Editor of *Chatelaine*) in *Slave of the Haida* undertakes what may be a much more difficult task, that of re-creating in the form of an adventure story the experience of the Northwest Coast Indians at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the white man's influence was almost unknown. In some respects this re-creation of a lost world is strikingly successful; not least in the way in which the reader empathizes closely with the young Salish hero and even with his Haida captors, so that when the white men make one of their seemingly capricious and unpredictable appearances they seem gross and churlish in their interruption of the Haidas' ceremony and in their attempts to over-ride and exploit the intricate protocol of gifts and barter. Seen against the background of the hundreds of Western movies and books in which the arrival of the white man indicated the triumph of "our side", this casual and un-rhetorical glimpse of the white explorers and traders, the "Iron Men" with their sinister pallor, through Indian eyes is no small achievement.

A similar integrity marks the way in which Doris Andersen has taken considerable pains to use authentic material despite the lack of written history about the lives of Indians during this period. Her thoroughness rewards the reader with some insight into the striking differences between Indian tribes of the same region. The Salish hero, Kim-ta, and his Haida captors have quite different concepts of beauty, system of lineage and taboos about food. In this respect *Slave of the Haida* can be seen as offering the child reader the first and perhaps the most important lesson of anthropology--that what is valued highly in one culture may be the object of scorn and contempt in another. However, in the process of revealing these cultural comparisons, the writer falls into the trap which yawns so invitingly before any painstaking researcher. She often fails to abridge some of the researched details so that the reader occasionally flounders into lists of artifacts or foods. A few minor revisions could have obviated this problem, since, as readers of Dickens know, details and even lists are not, in themselves, obstacles to narrative vigour. In a fictional world which has already been solidly and vividly realized for the reader, the writer has a degree of freedom to indulge in otherwise inconsequential details. However, when the fictional reality rests on slightly shaky foundations, such minor self-indulgences on the part of the writer become more perilous.

Slave of the Haida, especially in its first few episodes, suffers from two serious flaws which temporarily threaten the believability of the

subsequent narrative. Like other writers who select Indians as their subject, Doris Andersen attempts to convey the "otherness" of the Indian perception and the ritualized quality of the traditional Indian life-style by means of formalized language. Language, of this kind, very sparingly used in dialogue and in recounting a character's thoughts, can have the effect of conveying the way in which the Indian world-view is more intricately and formally patterned than that of most European cultures. Unfortunately Andersen sprinkles patches of formalized language rather arbitrarily in the earlier part of the book. There is no good reason, for example, for referring to Kim-ta's little sister as "the little sister of Kim-ta". The first half of the book has many such minute but jarring examples of ill-conceived formalization of language.

The second problem which flaws the first part of the book is the inadequate motivation provided for Kim-ta's hunting of the black bear. This episode has some importance of its own, but its main purpose is to act as trigger for the more important and exciting chain of events which take place once Kim-ta has been captured by the Haida. We learn of Kim-ta's obsession with killing a black bear (despite the fact that such an action performed outside the compensatory tribal ritual was taboo) in the second sentence of the novel. Since at this stage we know nothing of Kim-ta or of his people, his motivation is presented to the reader without a context and therefore without meaning. Children, however short their attention spans are reputed to be, cannot, any more than adult readers, become interested in the deeds of a character whose nature is entirely unknown to them. Those who write books of advice for aspiring children's book writers are fond of telling them to "plunge straight into the action" without delay, but ignore the fact that action in the absence of adequate characterisation takes place in a vacuum and will not attract the interest of even the most impatient, action-hungry reader. Once again, in the case of Andersen's book, very minor revision could have corrected the novel's too-precipitate opening.

Finally, a note on the book's appearance. It is clear from the editions of Dennis Lee's poems for children that Macmillan can produce elegant-looking books for children. Neither the dust jacket nor the three somewhat grudging illustrations do justice to the text. The illustration of the bear-killing episode is extremely static, but more importantly, the final illustration depicting Kim-ta himself shows a youth who not only does not look like a Northwest Coast Indian but does not even look like an Indian of any tribe. This last seems particularly unfortunate when the writer has taken such pains to indicate the distinctive differences in facial features between the Salish and the Haida. Surely too, when the art of the Northwest Coast Indians offers such powerful and effective designs it seems strange that the publishers should select such unimpressive drawings to illustrate the story.

Slave of the Haida is almost a very good adventure story. With a small amount of careful re-writing and with greater attention to the appearance of the book itself, it might have been a very impressive one.

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