

Indian Folklore and Fantasy

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Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses, Christie Harris. Illustrated by Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 155 p.p. \$7.95 cloth.

The Indian folklore of Canada, which has been the staple of Canadian fantasy written for children for some fifteen years now, is usually characterized by its etiological and outdoor flavour. Eschewing the courtly glamour and super-civilized heroes and heroines of post-mythopoeic European folktales, the writers who have revamped and expurgated Indian tales for the modern child's consumption have focussed upon Canada's wilderness past, upon man almost unaccommodated in it, and upon primitive explanations of hundreds of zoological phenomena, from the beaver's tail and the rabbit's hindlegs to the woodpecker's beak.

Such concentration is historically appropriate, since Canada's is a comparatively youthful civilization, and we have never had first-hand experience of the splendors and attendant perils of entrenched monarchy. But the modern urban child, whatever his race, may well be as vague about a beaver's anatomy as he is about the intricacies of the chivalric code, and may find a human princess imprisoned atop a glass mountain just as interesting as, and more easily imagined than, a shape-shifting badger-cum-man or a pipe-smoking whale. Moreover, Indian critics tell us that many of the current collections of so-called 'Indian tales' are in fact gross misrepresentations of their sources, that in making the stories less violent and, in some cases, less erotic, and in giving them the kind of coherence required by modern readers (especially white ones), the adapters have produced distorted, fragmentary, scarcely recognizable reflections of the ancient originals.

Of course, a good story is its own justification for being, even if it does maltreat source material. But many of these modern collections contain limp stories, gracelessly told. And if, like the small girl who returned her library book early because it 'told her more about the horse than she really cared to know', Canadian children are hearing and reading more nonsense than they care to about the origins of chipmunks' stripes and coyotes' markings simply because their elders believe they are providing authentic indigenous lore, then perhaps it is time for publishers and adult book-buyers to look much more critically than has been the custom at new collections of allegedly authentic Indian 'why' stories and to compare their intrinsic qualities with those of such refreshingly different little anthologies as Christie Harris's *Mouse Woman*.

Like Mrs. Harris's *Once upon a Totem* (1963), *Raven's Cry* (1966), *Once More upon a Totem* (1973), and *Sky Man on the Totem Pole* (1975), *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* concerns the Indians of the Pacific Northwest who, in their wealth and pride, developed a culture

sophisticated enough to give their stories a socially complex background comparable to the court-and-castle settings of European fairytales. The young heroines of *Mouse Woman* are not sweet and simple variations on Pretty Redwing, but accomplished, haughty young ladies who guard their dignity even more strenuously than they do their personal safety. And although the narnauks of these stories, like the supernatural beings of other Indian cultures, can change their physical forms, they confine themselves to two guises, one animal, the other human. Consequently, the ground-rules of the fantasy are kept reasonably clear, and the stories seem less arbitrary than most others of the *genre*.

Mrs. Harris also has a winning card in *Mouse Woman*, the little narnauk she first caught sight of in *Tsimshian Mythology* by Franz Boas and later traced in texts recorded early in this century for the Smithsonian Institution. Beyond her ability to shift her own shape, and on one occasion in this book to lend mouse guise to a human being, *Mouse Woman* is not a miracle-worker. But she is benevolent and wise, within the confines of her Grundy-like concern for proprieties. Her only moral weakness is a lust for wool to ravel with her 'ravelly little fingers', a lust that makes her demanding and sometimes pushes her to the brink of larceny. Otherwise she is a staunch defender of good sense and good etiquette among narnauks as well as people. She is also a champion of justice, although she occasionally exhibits alarming powers of rationalization, discovering ingenious reasons for believing that things have been 'made equal' even when her well-meant interferences are not entirely successful. Her quirks, her civilized intelligence, and her very limitations, which accommodate suspense, make her an interesting and effective intermediary between the real and the supernatural worlds.

Of the six stories in the book, the first, "The Princess and the Feathers", is by far the strongest. It has a clean-lined, exciting plot, and, apart from one lapse (of princesses who vanish permanently, we are told, "Again and again they vanished."), it is lucidly as well as briskly written. Wy-en-eeks the Eagle Princess is a spirited, resourceful heroine who keeps her head in horrifying circumstances, and *Mouse Woman*, appearing briefly as a white mouse to help the princess save herself, does only what any mouse might do by happenstance. Magic is present, but it does not detract from the achievement of the human heroine. The story also, unemphatically but clearly, introduces the remorseless justice that the Indians of old evidently approved, as Wy-en-eeks calls down terrible but just retribution upon her murderous enemy. This tale is a good introduction to the social and natural milieu of the book and also a gripping, pleasing story for readers of all ages.

In contrast, "The Princess and the Bears" is a strange mixture of pathos and mordant humour about a bizarre case of miscegenation which seems likely to evoke awkward questions from young readers despite the narration's careful avoidance of suggestive details. Braving *Mouse Woman*'s prim displeasure, a bear narnauk adopts his handsome human form to abduct a beautiful, petulant Indian princess—partly for her beauty and partly to give pause to her bear-slaughtering brothers. In due course the princess is

conducted to a bear's den where

The child was born. Twins.

Twins! Twin balls of dark fur!

They were BEAR CUBS.

"My children?" Rh-pi-sunt cried out, horrified.

"And mine," their father said, holding the cubs close. He touched their little black noses fondly. He scratched their tiny bellies.

The story's rather melancholy conclusion, melancholy for the disgraced princess at any rate, will do little to distract youthful questioners. The short emphatic sentences and half-sentences and the relatively undemanding diction are well suited to child readers; the tale itself is not, though it has a ruefully whimsical appeal.

The remaining four stories fall between these two stools; they are somewhat less interesting and satisfying than the first, but free from the sadness and perversity of the second. Supernatural wonders tend to accumulate in them, with proportional losses in human endeavour and hence in human interest. In "The Princess and the Magic Plume", the titular heroine does little but ignore Mouse Woman's frantic squeaks of warning and thus assists the narnauk Raven, Prince of Tricksters, in his grotesquely funny punishment of raucous, uncontrolled children and their permissive parents. Mouse Woman needs her ingenuity to reconcile herself to this outcome, but she manages:

. . .suddenly, her big, busy, mouse eyes narrowed. And her nose twitched. Raven had won. But perhaps she had won, too. For, by doing such an outrageous thing, Raven had shown his arrogant disregard for human beings. So, in the future, no powwow of Supernatural Beings would challenge HER right to handle troublesome young people. By losing, she had won. By winning, Raven had lost. And that was strangely satisfying.

Mouse Woman has more obvious reasons to be complacent in the other stories, but once she has to invoke the aid of her best supernatural friend, a 'dazzling lady' named Great-Charmer, to help her with an appalling opponent, Great-Whirlpool-Maker, who renders his captive princess quiescent by 'thinking grease into her mind'. And once her supernatural antagonists, gigantic snail narnauks, are so stupid that only their stupendous, ingenuous vanity keeps the story entertaining.

But when the fault-finding comparisons have been made, it must be stressed that all of these stories are entertaining—and fascinatingly different from the myths of eastern tribes that have dominated the field, numerically at least, to date.

And for the most part, Mrs. Harris does them justice with her pleasant tone and economical style. She does have some irritating habits. In or out of

season, whether the subject matter is tense or active or neither, she habitually uses short snappy sentences (all too many beginning with "for") and sentence fragments that carry a story forward at a rapid clip but also produce a staccato, hiccoughing effect. Her typographical emphases are obtrusively frequent. Ritualistic repetitions that probably echo the verbal formulas of oral storytellers become monotonous and suggestive of laziness, at least to adult eyes and ears. A penchant for word-play and verbal whimsy sometimes misleads her into near-coyness or even downright obscurity, as in "At the other end of awesomeness, there was Mouse Woman. . . ." Nevertheless, her descriptions are concisely evocative, and she places her bits of information and her provocative hints with a sure hand. Mouse Woman has found an appreciative biographer and an efficient teller of tales.

The stories are also well served by their illustrator, Douglas Tait, whose drawings range from a naturalistic sketch of an Indian girl picking berries, her basket suspended from a headband, to stark, startling, macabre pictures of an avid-eyed vulturous bird poised on a bare, sculptured branch and a worried little mouse, presumably Mouse Woman herself in mousy guise, crouching anxiously upon an enormous, long-toothed skull. Except for a handful, such as the recurrent sketch of Mouse Woman in hat and dancing blanket, a picture of a lordly bear enthroned in the darkness of a den-like lodge with totem-carved entrance pillars, and a portrait of Great-Whirlpool-Maker as a wild-haired brave with eyes almost mad enough to burn holes in the page, Tait's drawings are all realistic, and thus indicative of the reality that generated these richly imaginative stories in the minds of a complex, clever people.

In short, as she is presented in this book, Mouse Woman was well worth resurrecting, and so were the characters who live again to receive her benign busybody attentions.

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