Of Mice and Morals

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Mouse Woman and the Mischief-Makers, Christie Harris. Illus. by Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 115 pages. $7.95 hardcover.

Drawing on legends and tales of the Indians of Canada's Pacific Coast, Christie Harris weaves in this book a series of seven related but independent stories, all with a strong moral theme and all faithful to their source. Yet, although Mrs. Harris uses the Indian stories as her inspiration, these tales appear to be her own invention, and do not masquerade as "genuine" legends. This is a refreshing change from the numerous volumes of allegedly authentic material tarted-up for contemporary tastes, but suffering a loss of naturalness.

Each of these tales deals with an adventure of a tiny spirit-creature, half-mouse and half-grandmother. She is a chronic busybody, always supervising and constantly interfering in the affairs of spirits and human beings. She has a strong sense of propriety and impropriety, and is offended by anything that is done to defy the established order, whether it involves her directly or not. Her special interest lies with the young, and she takes pains to ensure that they are well-versed in the traditional practices of their society. Although she can be quite incensed by any infraction of the conventions, she is forgiving towards children and young adults, and eventually rescues them from whatever predicament they have become entangled in.

Since Mouse-Woman is half-mouse as well as half-spirit, she has one major character flaw, and that is her barely-contained urge to unravel woollen objects which are offered to her. She is supposed to allow such offerings to be consumed in the fire as a form of sacrifice to her spiritual side, but her mouse tendencies take over and in each story the result is restated:

> Before they were more than scorched, Mouse Woman spirited them out. And her ravelly little fingers began tearing them into a lovely, loose, nesty pile of mountain goat wool. Then, having received her favourite gift, she properly proceeded to give, in return, her favourite giving – advice to someone in trouble.

The stories each centre on some disruption of the proper order, and relate how Mouse Woman rectifies the infractions she finds so distasteful.

"Mouse Woman and Porcupine Hunter" deals with her reforming of a couple who exploit the slow-witted porcupines with such greed that they threaten the beasts with extinction. "Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princes" tells how she prevents her own Mouse People from luring young boys to their doom in a dangerous part of the forest. "Mouse Woman and the Snee-nee-iq" is a gruesome tale about the little spirit's thwarting of a cannibal giantess, and her corrective lessons to a young, badly-spoiled human girl.

In "Mouse Woman and the Wooden Wife", Mrs. Harris concocts some beautifully effective imagery and uses alliteration to achieve a subtly humourous effect in a mildly tragic story of lost love and loneliness. Combinations such as "spouse of splinters", "snowshoes . . . . snow shelters" and "strangely satisfying" tend to lighten somewhat the tone of the story without detracting from its seriousness.

Mouse woman rescues a woman from the lair of an undersea monster in "Mouse Woman and the Monster Killer Whale" and arranges a marriage between a mortal and a daughter of a spirit in "Mouse Woman and the Daughter of the Sun", a story which has a plot vaguely reminiscent of Cyrano de Bergerac, and which is the only one of Mouse Woman's adventures in which she does not have the pleasure of unravelling someone's wool.

The final tale, "Mouse Woman and the Tooth", departs from the pattern established in the first six. This story is ostensibly a narration of an incident from Mouse Woman's own childhood, when she lied in order to cover up her own greed. Having broken her tooth while pilfering some nut-cakes, she accuses another spirit of having done the damage. After an investigation, her grandmother confronts her with the incriminating evidence that she, Mouse Woman, a spirit-child of very high rank, has displayed the greatest vice possible for her people. The resolution of this problem brings both the seventh tale and the book to a satisfying close.

This collection of tales will stand on its own literary value, and does not need to be bolstered by its "Indian" origins. The skilful use of repetition, the delightful dashes of humour and insight, and the sympathetic treatment of children both wicked and well-behaved will render it appealing to boys and girls from the age of six or seven into the early adolescent years. The vocabulary is not subjected to any visible control, but none of the stories involve words or concepts beyond the capabilities of average children. Terms which are not defined are treated as if the child already knows their meanings, and the result is an unstilted style of prose that takes a child's intelligence for granted and avoids the awkward asides that many writers feel compelled to include for the sake of "education". As a result, the stress in all the stories is on the moral learning, rather than on language skills or anthropological concepts. This approach is much truer to the original intent of this literary genre than most of the others I have come across.

The major disappointment in this book is in the artwork. Th illustrations done by Mr. Tait reveal a skill and an attention to detail that i quite impressive, but the impact of all the drawings except one is negative In many instances the illustration is true neither to the text (a "beautiful' woman such as that illustrated in the "Killer Whale" story is unlikely t dazzle many eyes!) nor to the artistic traditions of the Pacific Coast tribes In spite of this aspect of the pictures, they do have a sort of horrifi fascination that will perhaps appeal to many children, and the final image of two Indian childen, has a haunting beauty that erases much of th ugliness and pain that the other illustrations depict.

Mrs. Harris is an established writer, with ten other volumes already to he credit. Her background in British Columbia, and her experiences witl children and with traditional lore have enabled her to weave many of he ideas into the fabric of her writing with a deftness that is often lacking i children's literature.

This book does not purport to be a definitive work of Canadia children's literature, but it is an appealing, interesting, and instructiv collection of stories from a mind that is obviously closely attuned both t the subject matter and to the audience.

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Visions and Revisions

LIONEL ADEY

Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds, Christie Harris. Illus. Lou Crockett McClelland & Stewart, 1978. 175 pp. $8.95 hardcover.

At her mother's behest Lark Doberly, a gawky, introverted Victoria schoolgirl, of the kind that always drops the ball in team-games, takes a