

The True North Strong and Free!

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River Runners; A Tale of Hardship and Bravery, James Houston. Drawings by the author. McClelland and Stewart, 1979. 142 pp. \$9.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7710-4282-5.

In characterizing Houston's works for juveniles up to 1977, the Children's Book Centre commented:

Most of Houston's books focus on a hero's courageous physical struggle against the harsh northern environment and his equally valiant moral struggle to do the just and honourable thing. They are stories in which the young hero must grow into maturity and extend himself to his physical limits if he is to survive. These journeys towards personal strength are always based on true stories.¹

River Runners, Houston's 1979 offering to upper elementary-junior high readers, fits the C.B.C. mold almost perfectly. "Here is an account based on true events that occurred some years ago . . .", announces Houston in his "Foreword". In the late nineteen forties, fifteen-year-old Andrew Stewart joins the small group manning the H.B.C. post at Fort Chimo on the Koksoak River which drains into Ungava Bay. Though Andrew is but a novice clerk, he and Pashak, a Naskapi Indian youth of similar age, are directed to establish a winter fur trading depot on Ghost Lake. While the lads do build the depot, the caribou herds which they need for food over the harsh winter do not arrive, and the adolescent pair are forced to join a Naskapi family in migrating southward into alien territory where game is more plentiful. In the spring, the young men make their way back to Fort Chimo, but *en route*, because of Andrew's white-know-it-all attitude, they lose almost all of the fur they have trapped, and also they nearly drown. A humbled-but-wiser Andrew decides to remain another year in the north so that he can do the honorable thing by going "back when the river freezes and finish building the outpost on Ghost Lake, and I'll pay back all my debts" (p. 140).

Houston's writing continues to be a celebration of the North and the people who live there. The experiences of a dozen years spent in the Arctic have obviously given him a vision of this land which is different from that held by many Canadians. Perhaps it is really Houston, the Canadian who has lived in America, who is speaking when one of the book's characters says, "Most Canadians have always clung tight to their southern border. That's a great mistake of theirs. The future of their country lies in the north

. . . . Today the message should be 'Go North!' That land up there is full of undiscovered treasure. But men must go there and sweat and freeze to find it" (p. 9). The treasure found by those populating Houston's books is rarely material, but rather consists of the discovery of their true selves.

While the southern-dwelling Canadian, via concrete and steel, controls his environment, in the North it is the land which changes man, and not everyone can meet the challenge. When one of the characters is sent south because of an accident, his injury provides a convenient excuse, but the real reason is that "he'll never be one of us" (p. 12). Andrew has brought with him the values of his culture, but from Pashak he learns to live in harmony with the land. For example, finding a fish trap filled with salmon, Andrew, the product of a consuming society which exploits its natural resources, wants to take all the fish while Pashak, whose people show concern for tomorrow's needs, prevents Andrew from catching more than they can use. The land provides Andrew with a *rite de passage*, and in the book's concluding sentence Andrew can joyfully proclaim, "he felt as though he, too, had become part of everything upon this earth" (p. 142).

A criticism which might be levied at *River Runners* is that the plot is weak; however, before that charge is made, attention must be drawn to the work's subtitle. Houston's inclusion of the term "tale" in his subtitle does not seem to have been gratuitous. He apparently has used the word to alert readers to the book's structure. A tale, as a prose form, is characterized by loose plotting and by having emphasis placed on happenings rather than on character development. In this instance, the result is a book wherein several segments shine, but the overall effect is lessened because of the tenuousness of the sinew connecting the parts.

In many ways, the book resembles a collection of short stories linked only chronologically or by a broad theme. The cycle of action beginning, building to a high point, and then subsiding occurs again and again without one of the action cycles seemingly influencing any of the others. Early in the book, for instance, Andrew appears to have met his nemesis. At some point before the story's beginning, George, a clerk who had wintered over, has slipped on the ice and strained his back. The nagging pain from his injury has apparently made him mean and nasty. When he is instructed by the post's factor to teach Andrew how to trade with the Naskapi Indians, he deliberately gives Andrew incorrect information. To the Naskapi, Andrew's actions suggest he is trying to cheat them, and the enraged hunters throw Andrew into the river where he almost drowns. Though Houston has created ideal conditions for continuing character conflict, George is removed from the book some ten pages later by being shipped off south on the supply ship.

Attention to authentic detail continues to mark Houston's work. Unobtrusively woven into the action is factual information about customs such as the Naskapis' placing their dead in trees, or the Montagnais' practice of ceremoniously painting the skulls of bears killed during the hunt. A certain degree of humour is introduced into the story when the Naskapi and Montagnais make contact during the severe winter and each tribal group assumes an ethnocentric view of the other. Chapters conclude with Houston's black and white drawings of some artifact or scene which relates to the completed chapter. The only point where Houston's accuracy momentarily deserts him occurs in the full color dust jacket painting where a blonde Andrew is portrayed while the text reveals that "Andrew had brown curly hair, not long, not really short" (p. 7).

Houston's significant place in Canadian children's literature was confirmed when, with *River Runners*, he became the first Canadian author to be a three time recipient of the Book-of-the-Year Award selected by the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians, a division of the Canadian Library Association.

NOTES

¹"James Houston." Unpaged pamphlet in The Children's Book Centre's "Meet the Author Kit No. 1."

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