

An Interview with James Houston

Mary Harker

Résumé: *Dans cette entrevue, James Houston raconte ses souvenirs à propos de son travail dans un vaste ensemble de formes d'expression artistique qui touchent à la vie des Inuit.*

James Houston can be credited with sparking contemporary interest in Inuit art and legends. Ten years ago CCL published an interview in which Mr. Houston discussed with Jon Stott the connection between his early love of story-telling and his development as a writer of children's books about the Arctic. (See CCL, # 20, pages 3-16). Since that time, the question of "white" artists' use of Native legends has become a topic of hot debate. This more recent interview throws unusual light on the topic as this distinguished artist reminisces about his work in a wide range of media relating to Inuit life.

Harker: You started out as an artist, then you turned to writing, and now you're into film and TV. . .

Houston: In fact, my first film was done in 1949. I was the subject, with some Eskimos, in a film about carving. We were living in Inukjuak. I had brought out some carvings the year before and there had been quite a bit of excitement. The film was about the beginning of the trading for carvings.

Inuit art has been made for 3,000 years, and it was as wonderful at the beginning as it is now. In 1948, when I returned from the north country, I brought out handfuls of interesting new stuff. Prior to that, Rasmussen and other anthropologists had always wanted to view what I call Eskimo art as artifacts. They would line up a bunch of harpoon heads and little knives and ulus and things which were objects from the material culture and functioned logically, and then at the end they'd have a little man and a bear and a sled just as part of that string. They didn't want to make any separation or view it as art. Well, Henry Moore, for one, had come to the Fogg Museum in the '30s, and he said, "These objects are small, but they're monumental in their concepts."

Harker: And Henry Moore would know. . .

Houston: Sure; he wasn't looking at them like harpoon heads. And I saw them, honestly, just like Henry Moore did. I had studied art; I wasn't specially interested in harpoons – I was interested in art objects. So my contribution was to look at the carvings seriously as brand new art objects. That was the

exciting thing: not that here was an object from a thousand years ago: it was an object made last night! I did everything I possibly could to move this forward into a *world* art, not just a Canadian one.

Harker: The sales were really monumental, weren't they?

Houston: Tremendous. Inuit art has stood up remarkably well in price over these difficult times. Lots of carvers are paying income tax: \$40,000 a year earnings on carvings. I always wanted that. I was in the Arctic in a sense for the government (though I first went north as an artist). They wanted me to be of economic benefit to the communities I was working for. But I had nothing to do directly with the artists as they worked.

Harker: What about the printmaking?

Houston: Now, that was different. That came later and I did have a lot to do with starting a workshop. Unlike the other 3,000 years of art, that was something new.

Harker: More recently you did a show about Northern art for the CBC.

Houston: I had very little to do with that except to beat the meat – I mean I talk about glass, the making of it and the carving. . . .

Harker: Were you actually making glass on TV?

Houston: Yes, and I carved a little wood and we baked a salmon in the primitive way and I talked to people about what they do.

Harker: When did you first go north?

Houston: In 1940 I was in the first Canadian Ski School. I had been skiing prior to the army, downhill slalom. I am really good about cold; it doesn't bother me at all. That gave me certain advantages in the military. I got up into the beginning of the Aleutian Chain, up into Northern British Columbia and Alaska, onto the Labrador coast, north Labrador. I was even hoping to go into the Arctic, but the military didn't let you do anything unless they had a special reason.

Harker: Then there was a book about the North you read during the war years. . . .

Houston: Count Gontran de Pencis's *Kabloona*.

Harker: Was de Pencis like a young boy coming out to clerk?

Houston: Not at all. He was a French count, a very well-educated man who had gone to the Oblate Mission in Paris and asked them for help in getting to the Arctic. He was very much disliked by the people in the country. The Mounted Police didn't like him, the Hudson's Bay didn't like him. Nobody liked him. But he was a good writer, a really good writer. He also made charming drawings – very, very nice drawings. So everything about him going there I liked. But I read it as I had been reading other romantic books about the Amazon jungle and East Africa and so on.

Harker: It wasn't anything special to you at the time.

Houston: Well, it was a little bit special because it was in Canada, and I am a Canadian. That made a difference.

Harker: I get the impression that your war service didn't have any particular formative influence on your writing. It was not a particularly bad time.

Houston: No, no. There was a certain camaraderie. But I did have the chance to go to some Native places and it gave me a desire to go further. And as you have probably heard, my father had been around the Indian country a lot. He had never been to the Arctic.

Harker: Did he ever go?

Houston: No, he never did. He died when I was 18 or 19, around the time the war broke out. During the war I also instructed courses in firing rifles, which is a very good way to learn to shoot. I was teaching in British Columbia or Ontario at Small Arms Schools, teaching officers who would teach other people. I considered I was one of the very best rifle shots in the whole country. Then I went among the Canadian Eskimos after the war, with an excellent rifle. They had cheap rifles from the Hudson's Bay company, very inferior to mine. But for about four years I was like a little child with them. They were so superior to me. First of all, they were so fast that I never could get a shot away. If three of them were standing in competition, all three would fire and the seal would be dead before I could get my act together.

None of them had good rifles. But still, what they had they knew how to use. Economically, they would fire one shot. An Eskimo could fire twenty-five times and bring in seventy birds. If you give any white guy I know twenty-five shells and he comes back with seven or eight birds, you'd think that was marvelous. Now, after shooting with the Eskimos for a dozen years, I instinctively know something about it. I learned a profound message. It applies also to hunting with a bow and arrow or a harpoon: how an animal moves, or what it's thinking – all those things are much more important than just throwing a bullet down a gullet.

Harker: I think that comes out in your books. Did you have the idea when you were in the North that you were going to write about it?

Houston: No, I didn't. I can tell you exactly how that happened. I had heard the legend of Tikta'liktak – heard it as an oral story: it had never been written down in the history of the world. I thought, "I would love to illustrate that story." After going back to the place I was staying, I started to make drawings for Tikta'liktak. Then, when I finally came down south in 1962, I met Margaret McElderry, an editor with Harcourt Brace – she later moved to Atheneum. She said "You must know some real Eskimo stories that might make a book." And I said "If you find anyone to write them I want to illustrate them." She said "I found somebody – you!" Later at lunch I told her the story of Tikta'liktak, and she said "Let's do it!" That was a Monday; I went home and I wrote it on the weekend. I started to write on Friday night and worked Friday night, all through Saturday, and a little bit on Sunday and it was finished. I had the illustrations but they were all wrong – none would fit into the shapes – so I redrew them the following weekend. So, two weekends –

Tikta'liktak took me a total of five days. Everything! It's now in 20 languages, at least 20 editions. No book ever worked so well for me! It won Canadian Library Association best book of the year, and a lot of things in the States. The New York Times took it as one of the best books of the year for children.

Harker: My favorite of your books for children is *The white archer*.

Houston: Me too!

Harker: It seems to have the most depth in it, maybe because it's longer than the others.

Houston: It isn't just that it's longer. *Black diamonds* and some of the others are longer – longer doesn't help. Two ideas are moving in that book. One is a powerful feeling of revenge, which is an exciting human emotion, finally met towards the end in a surprising way by a very strong feeling of compassion. An Eskimo, out to kill the Indians, finds his beloved sister married to one; he lives with them, and eats with them, and finds out they *are* great, and he sees that he was wrong.

Harker: That's a very significant thing in the Eskimo way of thinking, that Indians...

Houston: Absolutely. There's a strong feeling between Indians and Eskimos. There are only a few places where Indians and Eskimos really come together: Fort Chimo, Great Whale River, Churchill, and a few other places. I happened to be living in Fort Chimo when the Indians came in from inland and they had about a hundred caribou with them – a tremendous number – dead caribou, that they had hunted and killed. To our shock and amusement, they put up all their tents and invited all the Eskimos to come to a party. The Eskimos seemed at first apprehensive, but then everyone – and I happened to go along with them – had a super time with the Indians and they played the drum and were a delight. I'm talking about old times, forty years ago, when it wasn't like it is today with snowmobiles, far off times! And it just worked wonderfully. I saw such a feeling of compassion and friendliness between them. That, in a sense, became part of *The white archer*. I was able to *feel* that tension between the Indians and Eskimos.

Harker: Very few Eskimos would actually see Indians before '49 or '50 because they would be living in separate areas of the country.

Houston: Absolutely. The only reason the Indians were out at Chimo was that the Hudson's Bay Company had abandoned some posts. The Indians felt they must come out to Chimo to get ammunition and so on, so they came to the coast and met the Eskimos and they became sort-of friends. The same thing is true of Great Whale River. They lived on two separate sides of the river but now they very often get together and I think the children all go to school together.

Harker: I imagine a lot of Eskimos would have seen a white man rather than an Indian. Is that true?

Houston: Oh, positively. They have rarely seen an Indian; you can hate somebody you don't know. If you have some drinks and whoop it up and have fun with them, it's pretty hard to hate them as individuals.

Harker: You did some early films on Eskimo life, in the '50s and early '60s, didn't you?

Houston: We did a series about Eskimo life. We didn't call it "Inuit" life at that time, we called it "Eskimo" life. I was a narrator: as carvings appeared I talked about them. The first was an Eskimo legend, called *Legend of the Raven*, a particularly Dorset version of the original Raven story. I told the legend to Budge and Judy Crawley in Ottawa – we were all friends at the time, with Karsh and other people. Crawley Films had already made *The Loon's necklace* with Leitchman for the National Museum and they were anxious to make another. I wrote the script, collected carvings related to the story, and advised on every inch of it. We had this terrific French guy to advise on manipulations. No humans appeared, just manipulations of the carvings, against a set made of salt instead of snow. And I think it is beautiful. There is a copy of it in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Then I did *The living stone*. I was technical adviser. Then *Kenojuak*, with a woman artist, a very nice film for which we won 25 film awards all over the world. I also made some animated films for NBC in full colour. One was *The duck Shingapus*, from an Ojibway legend. The next one was a Northwest Coast story. Both of these are still around. I saw them replayed on television in 1986.

Harker: You did the illustrations for these films?

Houston: Drawings. They were moved around. There was a Chinese man, Wang Go Wen, said to be the first person in the world to do limited animation. Limited animation means that you don't do anything much with the drawing but you do a lot with the camera. Not like Disney, but coming in on a drawing and moving by it. Wang Go Wen invented it all; he happened to be in New York and through NBC we got together. He took all my drawings and set them on turntables and filmed them while I was doing the narration. And they were quite successful. They were made for children but they were recounting a Northwest Coast legend, an Ojibway legend, and an Eskimo legend.

Harker: You did more conventional films about the North about the same time, didn't you?

Houston: It was right after I had published my adult novel, *The white dawn*, in 1971. I wrote it, of course, as a novel. Then I wrote the screen play and worked for Paramount Pictures as Associate Producer. I picked a director, who later was in *Raiders of the lost Ark*, a camera man, the one who did *Jaws*, and three California actors. We all went North to see the locations, and then we picked some Inuit actors. Most of them couldn't speak a word of English.

Harker: Did they talk Inuktitut in the film?

Houston: Sure. We had subtitles sometimes. Then a New York film-maker named Edmund Swann asked if I would like to make a movie for him. I made

four films. And then suddenly the guy had a heart attack and died, while I was still in Alaska. Now he was a millionaire, many times over, but still, lawyers were not about to hand over money to finish the films. I have three of them, not finished. I should show them to some big oil company and say, "Listen, wouldn't you like to have your name all over these?" Especially if they're drilling on Indian or Eskimo lands and they want a better image. But in a busy life, you know, writing, if you go off on these asides, then you find you've got no book.

Harker: Well, those films probably aren't the sort of things that will get out of date, so you're not losing anything by leaving them for a while.

Houston: No, I'm not worried. Soon after that I went out to Calgary and was making the sculpture "Aurora Borealis". The man principally connected with that project saw my almost-completed films and asked me to do some for the Devonian. I made four and sold them outright.

Harker: You didn't get any royalties?

Houston: I don't want any. If they're in a museum they will be shown on CBC, BBC, PBS, and so on. I was offered a print when it was finished, but I was too busy, and I didn't have a projector. It's nice to make a film and be done with it. Books are different. Your publisher is supposed to tally them up and send you a cheque twice a year.

Harker: What comes to you first when you are writing a book? The plot or the characters or the setting?

Houston: I think I am always thinking of the illustrations. Or some event. I hear a story and want to reconstruct it as a novel, to find out as much as I can, not only just the facts but very much the feeling, the feeling of the country.

Harker: What about children's books? Do they evolve in the same way?

Houston: I think so. The Arctic is a stark place and I think that it lends itself somehow to children's books. The stories are often short and powerful. When I write for children the language is simpler, the writing is a little less complicated, which is good anyway.

For instance *Kiviok's magic journey* has a child-like ring to it. It is a legend taken from the Inuit world. Its form was already pretty nearly set. It is like Robin Hood, a well-fixed legend, and I would be very remiss if I fooled with it too much, and I didn't wish to.

Harker: *Kiviok's magic journey* strikes me as the most European of your stories.

Houston: It's a book that has been very much admired in Europe, and in England especially. That is one story that can be looked up in Rasmussen.

Harker: I've read Rasmussen's version, and it's a lot more vicious.

Houston: That's another thing about most pure legends. I've read a lot of the folk tales of the world – from Africa, Japan – and almost none of them work for us. You can read them as anthropological study, but most of them don't end anywhere.

Harker: A lot of Eskimo legends, to southern white Canadians such as myself, seem to have no beginning and no end.

Houston: They probably don't need to have either, because people's experiences were so held in common that listeners could fill in everything for themselves. When we're writing about the Inuit world we can't get away with that. A child reading in Winnipeg has no knowledge of how it goes in Arctic Bay or Tuktoyaktuk. I think my books reveal to a child or an adult the feelings of going along by dogteam, running into a storm, trying to build a snowhouse and the pleasures of being in it, and the relationships between the Inuit and how things work. That's the fun of it all if you can make it work.

Harker: I think it does work very well. I've never been north of the 60th parallel, but when I go to an Inuit museum display, I relate to all those objects – the ulu and so on – because of your books. You are conveying a strange and exotic world to your readers. But now, I'm sure if I went north with refrigerators and electricity and skidoos, it would be a more familiar world to me.

Houston: It's still an extraordinarily interesting world. You know, Sir Martin Frobisher went to the Arctic in 1547; when he returned in 1549 he said "The place is ruined – it's not got that real rough delight it had when we first saw it!" So people have been having marvelous experiences in the Arctic all through the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. It hasn't stopped at all.

Harker: Your adult novel *Ghost fox* was set in 1759 or so, wasn't it? What has drawn you to history?

Houston: You can only write about the past, the present or the future. I suppose I could write a sort of science fiction about the future, but for the time being I reject that. I had never really tried to write about the present until I did *Frozen fire* and *Black diamonds*. Curiously enough, *Frozen fire* outsold all my children's books five times over.

Harker: That surprises me.

Houston: All librarians love *The white archer*; I prefer it; most adults do, and lots of children like it. But I would say that if you ever tried to put *The white archer* against *Frozen fire* for children, you would lose ninety to one.

After I wrote *Frozen fire* and *Black diamonds* I paid careful attention to the reviews, and it seemed to me that most reviewers were very much in favour of *Frozen fire* and didn't like *Black diamonds* nearly so well. Then the Saskatchewan school system asked me to have a "phone patch" with the children in their various regions. About a month in advance, they said, "Is there anything you would like to know about the children? They've got plenty they want to know about you." I said, "Sure! Ask them if they like *Frozen fire* or *Black diamonds* best." And it came back to me without exception – without exception! the children preferred *Black diamonds*.

Harker: Well, in *Black diamonds* there's a little gizmo that comes from Texas or wherever and an outer space oil rig and they have to blow it up. That's what the kids would like. *Frozen fire* deals more with relationships – the boy missing

his mother, and often in quiet moments he thinks of her. Kids wouldn't like that particularly, would they?

Houston: I don't know. Let me ask you. Suppose you write for children, and you had your choice: write a book that is about human situations like the boy and his mother, which would essentially appeal to librarians and other adults and reviewers, or write a book full of action, helicopters and drills and things – your sales would be up and your reviews would be down and the librarians wouldn't love you very much, but children would be mad for you. Now how would you work this out?

Harker: Adults buy the books for children. How much does this come into it?

Houston: I like earning money like anybody else, but I would never write a book with that in mind, really. At the time, I was just moving along. It's only later that it gets analyzed. People who write reviews may be intellectually able to analyze people's work where they themselves can't. If you get wonderful reviews you think, "Ah, I'm getting pretty good at this thing," which is probably not true; and if you get terrible reviews, you feel very depressed. The best thing is just to go along your merry way, performing your craft joyfully, and see what comes out at the end.

Harker: What about the fact that you are writing for children – do you have them consciously in mind?

Houston: No, I think I just write.

Harker: I heard that you used two stories to make up *Frozen fire*.

Houston: That would be quite typical. And often when you hear a story you hear one side of it, say from the white point of view. You don't really know the Inuit side of it. Then I might try to reconstruct that. I know a lot about the life in the country, the cold weather, so I would be writing I hope quite accurately. But their own stories would be very different.

Harker: Have you heard from your Eskimo friends what they think of your books?

Houston: Yes, I have. Favourable things. They are naturally polite anyway. I have not heard anything unfavourable. They say it is really the way it was.

Harker: The way the old days were. Are your books translated into Inuktitut?

Houston: *The white dawn* is, and I think two of the children's books, *Tikta'lik-tak*, and *The white archer*, and maybe *Akavak*.

Harker: Do the Inuit like those that are set in the past, or do they like *Frozen fire* and *Black diamonds* that are more present-oriented?

Houston: I don't think they thought Frobisher Bay was well portrayed in *Frozen fire*. But I only heard one comment to the effect that I took a swing at modern family life.

Harker: I have a similar question about the Indians.

Houston: The Indians like *Ghost fox* very much. They said they often found they had been portrayed from a white point of view only, and they thought I had portrayed them very fairly.

Harker: I wonder how you see the role women play in your children's books, compared to the adult books.

Houston: Perhaps you feel I give them more scope in adult books?

Harker: Yes, I do. In *Eagle song*, for instance, Fog Woman is quite strong. Whereas in the children's books, the women are background. In *Akavak* you have a mother and sister who say goodbye to Akavak when he goes, but that is the end of their role in the book.

Houston: Well, you know, I had not thought about that. My earliest books were pretty male, you know.

Harker: About hunting and so on.

Houston: Hunting is pretty easy, compared to really talking about family relationships.

Harker: That remains an area in Eskimo life not understood by people in the south.

Houston: They are very much like ourselves in this regard. It would be hard for you to analyze how the people in Ottawa regard their wives, because some of them hate their wives, some of them love them, some are very fine, some are very cruel. You would find it hard to find a common denominator.

Harker: Each family is different, yes. Yet the vogue in children's literature is to concentrate on problems – the father is divorced, or the mother is alcoholic. But there are no books like that concerning the Eskimos.

Houston: There's one, Jean Craighead George's *Julie and the wolves*.

Harker: The family relationships are unfathomable to me. I don't get a sense of how husband and wife and children interact.

Houston: We know that people are devoted to each other in certain ways, but then there are other surprising ways when they don't seem to be at all. Lots of the familiar signs are missing, and lots of perhaps curious strange signs that we hardly understand are there.

I'll tell you a story. Once when I was in the North, the government said, "Why don't you have a contest to see who can make the best skin clothing?" So I said, "Okay, I'll do that." There was one man so powerful that he pretty well scared everybody off from competing. At the time the contest was done, he appeared with two dog teams, all appointed so gorgeously. You had never seen anything so wonderful in the world. Now his wife had obviously done all of the sewing; he masterminded it, the women did the work. So I gave out the prizes to his family right in front of him. He went away with them. Within a few minutes his wife came back with a black eye. She gave me the box with all the prizes in it: "Take them. You have to take them all back." He was so angry at me; he felt he had lost face. His point was, "These women didn't do that. I designed that clothing, I figured it all out. I told them where to sew. It was all

me." I hadn't understood that; I was too naive to understand. Judging by my own family, my father wouldn't have wanted any prize at all. He would have thought, "My whole family wins. Here we are, close knit..." But this man didn't see it that way. I have always been sorry for that. We did become friends again but it took some time. When we made *The white dawn* he came over to Frobisher and said "I think now I was sort of wrong. You weren't trying to be bad towards me; it was the way you were thinking and I was thinking and so on." And I said, "Oh, yes, sir, you should forgive me for that. I think the same thing – I did something wrong."

Harker: The way you told that story made me think of something you once wrote in *Canadian children's literature*. You said, "One would do best to listen carefully for some strange and fascinating core of truth." Do you think each of your books demonstrates a different bit of truth?

Houston: Well, in *Frozen fire* each of the boys out on the ice does something: making a lamp out of the heart of the seal, and making a circle of seal's blood around the igloo so that the helicopter could find them. Each contributes to their survival. That was the core of truth.

Editor's Note: this interview is part of a much longer interview which Mary Harker conducted. Researchers wishing to consult the full interview can see it in the University of Guelph Archives.

Mary Harker is an Ottawa freelance interviewer with a special interest in *Canadian children's literature*.