

## BEOTHUK DARKNESS

**Blood Red Ochre.** Kevin Major. Doubleday Canada, 1989. 147 pp., \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-29794-7.

For generations Newfoundlanders have been troubled by the disappearance of the Beothuk Indian in the early 1800s. Although historians still dispute the degree to which our British forebears should be blamed for this disappearance, there is no doubt that our diseases, our firearms, and our steady appropriation of the food sources of an already marginal people led to their extinction. Kevin Major writes, "the story of the Beothuks is impossible for any Newfoundland-born author to escape. . . (It was) the darkest hour of Newfoundland's history." In *Blood Red Ochre*, he explores this "darkest hour" with unflinching honesty, compelling power, and consummate craftsmanship.

Beginning with an intent to "mix two cultures that were centuries apart," Major develops a plot structure in which two narratives, one historic and the other contemporary, are skillfully dovetailed, the better to contrast the dying agony of the Beothuk with the bewildered guilt of the modern white men. In the penultimate chapter, Major fuses these two realistic narratives with the fantasy technique of time-travel in a daring structural twist that underlines the disturbing theme of this story.

Major seamlessly interweaves the two narratives throughout, using symbols such as a pendant, images of blood and violence, motifs of journeys and families, and, above all, the brooding presence of the landscape and climate of Newfoundland. Even the title, in melding the grade school name of the Beothuk – the Red Ochre people – with the blood of historical violence, underlines the cohesion of past and present.

With his narrative structure thus secure and coherent, Major plays inventively with characterization, using contrasting prose styles and points of view to emphasize the conflicting personae and cultures of his native and white protagonists and to shape his readers' attitude towards them. David, the focus of the contemporary narrative, has normal young adult concerns about identity, school, family, and, especially, the opposite sex; he is portrayed in the brisk but casual third-person prose replete with dialogue and contemporary vocabulary that is Major's trademark. ("Hi," he said, 'Whatdaya up to?' As soon as he said it, he knew it sounded ridiculous.") In contrast, Dauoodaset, the young Beothuk of the historical narrative, is characterized in the first person and present tense; vivid imagery and careful yet rhythmic syntax reminiscent of "foreign" speakers of English give Dauoodaset's voice the emotional power and authority of poetry. ("If there is one thing I will know again, it is herself close to me. It is the thought of Shanawdithit that will travel with me and hold to me until the end.") Dauoodaset's organic spirituality, courage, and hope in the face of extinction throw David into ironic relief as shallow, almost effete, yet

the young Beothuk's doomed struggle to survive is itself shot through with heartbreaking irony.

The two male protagonists are both separated and joined by the young woman Shanawdithit, historically the last known living Beothuk. Somehow transported to the present, she appears in David's narrative as Nancy, which, as we Newfoundlanders learn in grade school, was the name given to Shanawdithit by her white captors. Major's enigmatic Nancy speaks and acts as a symbol of the Beothuk, voicing their rage at the white man's usurpation and destruction.

In the end, we are left, like David, baffled by this tragedy in our history, "trying to make sense of it", knowing that our attempt, like David's, to atone for the violence of our forebears comes too late to make any difference to the vanished Beothuk. Ultimately, Major asks more questions than he answers, and in exploring the relevance of Newfoundland's "darkest hour" to our present-day personal and social conscience, his *Blood Red Ochre* adds a dark urgency to the universal, timely, and complex problem of the relationship between the native and immigrant peoples of North America.

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## INUIT MAGIC

**Whiteout.** James Houston. Greedy de Pencier, 1988. 175 pp., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920775-28-4.

*Whiteout* explores and explains James Houston's well-documented fascination with the Canadian Arctic and its unique and magical people. But the focus in this text is not so much on the place itself, but on the effect such an environment can have on an outsider, in this case Jonathan (Jon) Aird, a character more reminiscent of a Kevin Major protagonist than a hero from Inuit legend.

Convicted of possessing drugs, Jon is sentenced to a year's work in community service in Nanuvik, a small settlement on Baffin Island. A gifted but lazy musician, Jon is asked to teach music at the government school while living with his obsessively strict uncle, whose approval Jon needs to receive his inheritance.

