

Book Reviews

Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology, by Robin Ridington. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990. Pp. xviii, 281. Illus. \$16.95 paper.

What “little bit” did I come to know from reading this collection of papers first published, or in one case given as a speech, between 1976 and 1989? There is no doubt that I learned or relearned quite “a little bit” about the traditional “thoughtworld” and current political situation of the Athapaskan-speaking Beaver Indians, or Dunne-za, of northern British Columbia with whom Robin Ridington has lived off and on since 1959. I also learned a “little bit” more about how anthropologists of the last two or three decades, and Ridington in particular, have perceived their discipline and presented their data. Readers will find the book informative and thought-provoking, well worth reading whether or not they are specifically interested in northern natives or the nature of ethnographic writing. Although the essays are not all equally successful, the issues they raise are significant, and their style is intriguing, often eloquent and moving, sometimes baffling.

A Foreword and Introduction announce Ridington’s aim of using the traditional Dunne-za approach to teaching — that of “storytelling” — to convey what he has learned about and from the Dunne-za. The fourteen papers that follow are grouped into four sets organized by theme rather than by chronological sequence. Each set has an introductory statement, and a one-page Epilogue and an Appendix relating to the Beaver Indian Audio Archive close the volume. Several hauntingly expressive pictures of Dunne-za elders are among the six photographs that precede major sections of the volume.

Both in his earlier *Trail to Heaven* (1988) and in this book, which he sees as complementary to it, the author clearly has a mission. Convinced that Dunne-za “phenomenology” and ways of learning from direct experience differ greatly from those of Western academia, with its “authoritative

institutions,” Ridington hopes to reconcile these differences and “expand anthropological discourse” (p. xiv). He describes these papers as “academic” and directed primarily to anthropology students (p. xiii), but anthropology, he says, “assumes that its own written texts and their institutionally situated authors have a privileged authority” (p. xiv). This makes Ridington very uncomfortable. He therefore rejects the writing style of “institutionally empowered anthropological authority” (p. xvi). As a cross-cultural translator, he believes that to do justice to what and how the Dunne-za have taught him he must somehow link what he calls a circle of “highly contextualized” Beaver stories (p. xiv) to the kinds of texts that mark professional anthropology. The appropriate language for this endeavour is “storytelling,” and the particular stories in this book are about Dunne-za knowledge and power.

A “story” seems to be any account based on one’s own first-hand experience, whether in the sensory and objective world or in the world of myth and dream which plays so large a role in Dunne-za lives. Ridington wants the reader, or — ideally — the listener, to hear these stories, as do the Dunne-za, with the “authority of his or her own experience” (p. xv). Indeed, the book’s title derives from the fact that any Dunne-za who speaks from such authority is said to “a little bit know something” (pp. xv; 109 and *passim*). Further, that “little bit” is a “small but complete whole,” rather than “the small and incomplete part of the whole” which Westerners count as knowledge but which Ridington describes as “instrumental to purposes removed from experience” (p. xv).

Every Dunne-za story also “contains every other” (p. xvii). The traditional Indians shared a common mythology about giant animals who once ate humans and about the culture hero-transformer Swan, who followed a song trail to heaven to become Saya, the sun-moon, cyclically moving from horizon to horizon, day to night, and season to season, and whose flight from earth to heaven could be repeated by shaman-like Dreamers who formerly taught their people songs and guided them on communal hunts through their dreaming. Swan-Saya made the first vision quest, and ever since the central event of every traditional Dunne-za’s life has been a childhood vision quest similar to that of Swan-Saya. Through this “searing transformative” experience, each quester acquired the crucial “empowering knowledge” and medicine powers that enabled him to understand and live in the world as an adult (p. 70). Success in hunting depended primarily on following dream trails, as Swan-Saya did.

This concern with dream knowledge and power is why both at the start and finish of his book Ridington rather mystically invites us to “dream”

into his stories as the only way we can really experience them and gain the knowledge they can impart.

In a short review I can only hint at the range of topics and the richness, sensitivity, and insights contained in Ridington's "stories" and at the flavour of his style. Similarly, I can only suggest what appear to be some possible flaws. "Fox and Chickadee" (1987), the first essay in section one: "Stories in a Language," tells how shortly after Ridington began fieldwork, an elder named Japasa, or "Chickadee," who was nearing death, publicly recounted his boyhood vision quest during which he met and lived with fox people and became a friend of rabbits, wind, and rain. He also publicly sang the songs that he learned from these beings. In this way Japasa both revealed the nature of his medicine powers and gave them up. Soon afterwards he died. It was this experience that led Ridington to abandon the Need for Achievement tests that he had begun to administer for his research project and to begin to listen instead to Dunne-za stories (p. 3). Overall, "Fox and Chickadee" is a much more straightforward and moving "story" than is the 1976 paper ending the first section. In "Eyes on the Wheel" the author blends a story by his informant, Jumbie, to whom he dedicates the book, with that of Neil Armstrong's space exploration. In truly elliptical language, he argues that rather than being culture-specific, the symbolic messages of a given society's myths can appear at any place and at any time because they reflect the same patterns of human experience.

"Knowledge, Power and the Individual in Subarctic Hunting Societies" (1988) elaborates the theme, binding together all the papers of the second set: "The World of the Hunters." This is the well-known point that a complex of "knowledge, power, and individualism" rather than technology is the truly distinctive adaptation of successful sub-arctic hunters. He suggests further that this complex has affected the theoretical positions of a number of ethnographers who have worked with northern natives, citing Speck, Hallowell — whose work he says has been "re-discovered" — and other more recent scholars. He lauds Hallowell's "perspective which includes an analysis of the outlook of the people themselves" (p. 118). I totally agree with this perspective myself, but wonder whether Ridington has not underplayed important influences on Hallowell's position other than those of his Ojibwa informants. Although Hallowell was a uniquely creative thinker, much that is integral to his thought also came from fruitful exchange with other anthropologists and western scholars such as philosopher Grace de Laguna and her student Maude, to whom he was married.

The first paper in the third division, "The Politics of Experience," is "Sequence and Hierarchy in Cultural Experience: Phases and the Mo-

ment of Transformation.” In spite of Ridington’s avowed intention to forgo “anthropologese” in favour of “stories” (p. xiii), both the title and the text of this paper strike me as unnecessarily laden with jargon. What will the student or even the professor make of: “Although possessed of the phenomenological moment, human experience derives its meaning from its place in a superorganic hierarchy of information” (p. 123), or of “cognized strips of experience” (p. 124)? Still, the paper includes a fascinating native account of a vision quest as well as a lot of interpretation by the author, quite a bit of which rings true to me from my own experience with northern Athapaskan speakers. This section also offers a comparative paper on Dunne-za and Algonkian concepts of Wechuge and Windigo which Ridington finds to be in opposition at a superficial level, although ultimately derived from similar thoughtworlds. As so often, Ridington looks mostly east for his comparative material. Throughout the book, in fact, he rarely refers to explicit cultural behaviour of Beaver bands other than those with which he has lived or considers data from the neighbouring Sekani and other Athapaskans to the north and west, let alone the nearby Plains-influenced Sarsi.

The papers making up the final set, “The Problem of Discourse,” were all written the the 1980s. These essays contain relatively more data from the current Dunne-za scene than discussion of traditional thought and culture. Western historical events become a little more firmly anchored in time. Although Ridington never really explains how Cree Indians came to be living on the same reservation with the Dunne-za (a situation barely mentioned in the earlier essays), readers do learn of some major changes in Dunne-za life that followed the development of oil and gas fields. By the time Ridington wrote the papers, he had known the Dunne-za for more than twenty years, and native political consciousness had been raised considerably throughout Canada. Here Ridington champions political justice for the natives who, because of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, remain powerless. These are the “stories” which will probably be most easily understood by students and non-anthropologists.

One describes how gas from an oil well on the very edge of the reservation almost poisoned the entire population of a Beaver and Cree village, yet the people had to remain living there for quite a while afterwards. Another tells how the local Indian agent summarily gave to the Veterans Land Administration important ceremonial lands granted to the Beaver under Treaty Eight. The Indians have been unable to redress either wrong through court action because their “storied” form of discourse and that of the court differ so fundamentally in premises and approach. Contrasting

modes of discourse are also highlighted in the fourth paper, which analyzes how the host of a Vancouver radio talk show manipulated the program to support and engender prejudice against the Indians.

On a slightly different tack, the third paper, "In Doig People's Ears," discusses the audio archive of the Dunne-za made by Ridington, his wife Jillian, and Howard Broomfield, as well as several documentaries derived from it. The documentaries are meant to "recontextualize" the aural elements of the archive to make them meaningful to both Dunne-za and westerners. "Soundscapes" both of traditional Dunne-za and present-day culture are bridged by accounts of Dunne-za life as told by white oldtimers, so that the listener will understand an Indian community's changing ways of listening to the world around it. Ridington believes that "an audio documentary style using actualities from every day life" is an alternative to narrative writing as a way of getting closer to "the normal discourse of a culture that is genuine in Sapir's terms" (p. 258). In short, he sees it as another way to expand anthropological discourse. He thinks too that such audio-ethnography describes a "poignant moment in human history" when "hunting and gathering" people are moving into the industrial world, and he hopes the documentaries may help us to plan the future as well as to understand the past, for "we" cannot afford to ignore "the intelligence of our hunting and gathering ancestors" (p. 239). I share this hope; we cannot afford to ignore the intelligence of *any* human society.

Ridington says he edited the book for "redundancy," but retained considerable repetition of key ethnographic material because each essay presents it in a different perspective. For me, reading about the myths person-eating giants (few are actually told) and about Swan-Saya and the vision quest for the fourth or fifth time in close succession somewhat diminished their impact, no matter how crucial the data for the argument or how rhapsodic the prose describing them. On the other hand, repetition of basic information is hard to avoid in any set of papers written over a period of years; perhaps, in good Dunne-za fashion, we should just try to "figure out" more of its meaning each time we encounter it.

A bit more worrisome is Ridington's persistent penchant for finding oppositions and transformations reminiscent of the approach of Lévi-Strauss and other deep structuralists. He assures us, for instance, that the vision quest "symbolically transforms the child's meat into spirit, and the hunt transforms the animal's spirit into meat" (p. 60). At a certain level this may be true, but as such revelations accumulate, so also do nagging doubts as to whether all these matters were ever quite so tidily structured. In a curious way, the leeway for individual creativity and historical change

begins to shrink even as Ridington stresses the marked individualism of northern hunters, and surely his stark dichotomizing of generalized hunter-gatherers and western industrialists sometimes obscures far greater complexities than Ridington acknowledges.

Likewise bothersome are his apparently easy leaps from specific and localized Dunne-za contexts to assumed universals of the subconscious or symbolic in line with the writings of Jung, Eliade, and Campbell; the transitions are usually made without much consideration of anything in between. Ridington is often a rapid generalizer in the sense that the particular Dunne-za with whom Ridington lived quickly come to stand for all Beaver Indians, then for all northern Athapaskans, then for all sub-arctic hunters, and finally for all hunters and gatherers of the past. The ethnographic diversity of cultures and complex histories that actually mark these larger groupings are not mentioned.

Only a detailed appraisal of every paper would allow fair discussion of the above issues, so they must be left hanging. As my opening paragraph implies, however, in many ways this book — unsurprisingly — reflects popular anthropological trends of the last decades. Chief among them are an increased preoccupation with various forms of structuralism, symbolism, reflexive anthropology, political theory, communication theory, and the “textualization” of anthropology. Lurking in the background in addition to Jung, Eliade, and Campbell are surely such figures as Lévi-Strauss, Marx, Godelier, Geertz, Chomsky, G. Marcus and M. Fisher, Miles Richardson, and others. Certainly the essays reflect too the rebellion of the young against “institutional authority” that swelled and rolled through academe in the late sixties and seventies.

The best reviewer of this book should probably be one younger than I whose remembered dream life is fuller and more vivid than mine. My own style of telling about sub-arctic hunters and gatherers is somewhat different from Ridington's. Yet I too want to translate Athapaskan lives and “intelligence” into a language which will bring understanding to western anthropologists and non-anthropologists, and to Athapaskans themselves. I believe that the best ethnographers from Boas on have all struggled to present both the “inside” and the “outside” view of other cultures in order to make them as comprehensible as possible to the western society that created anthropology. In doing this they have used a variety of languages, for no single one can ever serve. Ridington is to be applauded for attempting to work out a style which seems to him best suited for expressing the nature of Dunne-za culture. Still, his “storytelling” can tell us only a “little bit.” I

am certain that even many "languages" will never tell us the ethnographic whole. It is always changing, as are the speakers and the listeners, the readers and the writers.

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The Story of the Sechelt Nation, by Lester Peterson. Published by Harbour Publishing (Madeira Park, B.C.) for the Sechelt Indian Band, 1990. Pp. xiii, 145. \$15.95 paper.

If one has read Sunshine Coast author Lester Peterson's previous books, *The Gibsons Landing Story* or *The Cape Scott Story*, one comes hopefully to his new book on the Sechelt Indians. Peterson tells a good story, and his taste for the lore of historical geography and oral history was apparent in those earlier works. In *The Story of the Sechelt Nation* he takes on a very different task. This book is a presentation of mythic accounts, ethnographic details, and community history of the Sechelt Indian Band of Sechelt, B.C. and is based on long personal friendships with some of the most knowledgeable members of that native community. Peterson started working in the late 1950s with Basil Joe, Reg Paull, and others, recording their stories, reminiscences, and opinions. He then wove these into a tapestry of cultural history which the Sechelt band council agreed to co-publish.

For an outsider to write the story of a native community today is both demanding and daring. One of the messages from native communities in these post-Oka times is that the native experience and perspective differs from that of the mainstream community and that many native people resent outsiders speaking for them. This allows us to focus clearly on the task that Peterson has undertaken. The product must represent not only the facts but also the viewpoints and values of the community. The obligation is brought more clearly into perspective when one realizes that this account, since it has the imprimatur of the band itself, will probably be used by the Sechelts of today and the future as a reference book for their history and beliefs. That being the case, I wish I could say that Peterson's book fulfils this obligation, but I cannot. It is neither the readable and authoritative account nor the reference source on the Sechelts that it could and should be.

Peterson approaches the story of the Sechelts from a geographical and comparative perspective. As he presents it, the story commences with mythic accounts; it then progresses through the more recent legendary exploits of Sechelt forebears to happenings and cultural practice within