
Got Any Grapes?: Reading Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*

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Prologue

The Back of the Turtle is about stories within stories. Like the storied lives of people in First Nations cultures, the characters in Thomas King's latest novel lead multiply storied lives. Some of the stories have Christian origins. Others are unique to First Nations. Some are from popular culture, like the joke about a duck that walks into a bar and asks, "Got any grapes?" This joke in turn links to a popular mind worm, "The Duck Song." For the characters themselves as well as for the author, these stories and others come together to form a whole. If Coyote were a storyteller, which he is, one of his names would be Thomas King.

The *Back of the Turtle* is not about ducks any more than it is just about resurrection or The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, although all these and other stories enter into it. Muskrat is a better candidate for diving down and bringing up the world. There are turtles in the story too. In some First Nations stories the turtle carries the world on its back. Here King brings all these stories together. From now on I'll just refer to him as Tom. Canadians know him as Tom from the CBC Radio program, "The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour" that

ran from 1997 to 2000. Each episode was actually only fifteen minutes, but hyperbole and inflation are to be expected on air; Tom doesn't stand on formalities.

Tom's *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* was first given orally, and later became a book. Each chapter began with another version of the turtle story. Like all of Tom's writing, *The Back of the Turtle* is as much about stories as it is about Indians or turtles, but as a novel the story has a narrative structure. I use the term Indian rather than the current First Nations as that's the word Tom uses. Within the narrative are stories of the destructive hubris of western civilization balanced by stories of creation. Indian stories came before books, and with any luck will be here as long as people tell stories. The Bible contains lots of stories, and most of these probably existed before books. For thousands of years though, they have existed within the containment of written words, despite generations of exegetes who made their livings performing them from the pulpit or, more recently, on radio and television. Indians' stories have a different life. Their stories are as ephemeral as vibrations in air and as enduring as the passage of one generation into another. They don't vanish with the supposedly vanishing Indian.

Tom begins this book with a medley of creation stories and lots of characters to choose from. There is The Woman Who Fell from the Sky. There is God, known here as Dad, whom Nietzsche (and the Dead Dog Café) proclaimed to be dead. There is Sonny, his son, who wields Thor's hammer but also collects salvage, and there is a dog named Soldier, who died in Tom's *Truth and Bright Water* but has returned now when he is needed. There is Nicholas Crisp, known in English history for manufacturing beads and probably trading slaves. Here he is pretty frisky, despite being even older than God. He has goat thighs like the god Pan. The human characters have mythic resonances in the same way that mythic

characters have human attributes. God the father and God the son, Dad and Sonny.

Gabriel Quinn is an Indian from Lethbridge, Alberta. His mother was from Smoke River on Samaritan Bay on the BC coast. His name suggests Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel and maybe Bob Dylan's "Quinn the Eskimo." Quinn took an engineering degree at Stanford and became chief scientist at the biotech company, Domidion. The name resonates with the Old Testament promise for man to have dominion over nature (*Genesis* 1:26). It certainly resonates with the names of biotech companies like Monsanto.

Quinn, as Domidion's Head of Biological Oversight, developed a version of the genetically modified bacterium *Klebsiella planticola* SDF 20 into a monster Domidion called Green Sweep. Green Sweep, it turned out, has the ability to kill any plant it contains. Tom didn't make this up, either. A mutant *Klebsiella planticola* called SDF 20 (Raine n.pag.) was really developed and nearly escaped. In a bizarre twist that only big pharma can explain, SDF 20 is also a proprietary code name for Sildenafil, also known as Viagra. Sounds like Coyote at work. Green Sweep caused "The Ruin" in which Indians and turtles living on Samaritan Bay disappeared (48). (Tom is certainly aware that a poem called *The Ruin* is probably the earliest piece of literature written in English).

The Story

Stories sometimes say as much about what is unsaid, but mutually understood by teller and listener, as they do about what is actually said. I once wrote:

The discourse of Native people takes place within real time, but it is meaningful in relation to a time of mind, a mythic time. Performer and listener share both a common time frame and a complementary knowledge of that mythic world. They share a common responsibility to the names that are fabulous in their

lands. Their relationship to the names and to one another is conversational. (Ridington 276)

Quinn disappears mysteriously from his office at Domidion, as does the turtle kept in a tank at the company's headquarters. He leaves enigmatic writing on the wall of his rented bungalow: Bhopal, Chernobyl, Pine Ridge, Grassy Narrows. The Book of Daniel tells a story about King Belshazzar, who used sacred vessels stolen from Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem for a feast. Suddenly, a disembodied hand appeared and wrote these words on the wall: *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*, "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting" (Daniel 5: 25-28). That night the king was killed and his city taken by the Persians. Quinn, like Daniel, has found Domidion wanting. As a balance to this destruction, he also wrote out the story of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky. Having destroyed turtles and Indians, Quinn now has an obligation to help create a new world from the one Domidion destroyed. Quinn is desperate to remove the guilt he feels for having created yet another environmental disaster, a left-handed creation.

The story begins with a Prologue. At first light, the shore of Samaritan Bay is in shadows. Crisp and Master Dog share an apple. "It's the stuff of creation," Crisp tells his companion (1). No prohibition here about eating forbidden fruit. The God who issued that decree hasn't been seen for a long time. Maybe he has transformed himself into the dog, Soldier. As we learn later, that would make Soldier and Crisp brothers. A figure emerges from the trees and begins his final descent to the beach. "There he be, as you predicted . . . but just remember, this be your idea," Crisp says to Master Dog (1-2). The figure that emerges is Quinn, who has left Domidion and traveled to Smoke River. This is where his mother, Rose, came from and returned to; it's where she, Quinn's sister Lilly, and Lilly's son Riel died.

Quinn has come here to walk into the sea at low tide and climb onto rocks known as the Apostles. Quinn has brought a drum with him and plans to sing as the tide rises. As he sings, the ocean will wash away his transgressions. "It was going to be a good day," he thinks, echoing "a good day to die," (5) a phrase attributed to Crazy Horse and repeated by Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man*. He slipped off his cloth-and-leather jacket with "Crow Fair—Powwow Capital of the World" written on it. He slipped off the rest of his clothes.

But then something unexpected happened. A hand reached out from the water. But this hand was not disembodied. It was the hand of a young girl. He found his jacket and wrapped it around her. He began to sing a fierce grass-dance song. On the Apostles he began to act like a good Samaritan. He made his way from there to the beach and emerged from the sea naked as the day he was born. He found the dog waiting for him. Above the beach is the Ocean Star Motel, whose motto, "Follow the Star," is a reference to the Magi in the Nativity story. Quinn emerged to receive the message of redemptive salvation. It's getting to sound a lot like a story from the Christian gospels, but maybe there's something worth saving from these stories too. Maybe, like *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, he is looking for a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1).

Samaritan Bay without the Indians is a strange place. Crisp and Sonny live there. Dad lived there in motel room number one, Sonny in number two and Crisp in number three, but Dad's room seems to be empty. Dad and Crisp are brothers from primal stories of ancient times. Because Dad hasn't been seen lately Sonny tries to be the "beloved son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). He is disappointed that Dad doesn't seem to be listening. Sonny likes to break things with his hammer, but he also collects salvage. He is from a different generation than Dad and Crisp. He is still new

to putting broken pieces together, but he is learning. He really wants the turtles to return.

The cast of characters assembles as the story begins. Sonny is on the beach looking for salvage, for salvation, but there are no turtles and no Indians, except for Quinn. That is soon to change. A woman in jeans and a blue shirt wades in the surf toward where Quinn is lying, still naked. The woman is Mara Reid, a real live Indian who used to live on the Smoke River reserve. Her best friend was Lilly, Quinn's sister, but he doesn't know that yet. Mara begins a conversation:

I've seen you out here several times.
I'm trying to kill myself.
You're not very good at it.

Mara recognizes Quinn's first name from the story about *The Woman who Fell from the Sky*. "Gabriel, like the left handed twin," she says (36).

The Back of The Turtle weaves together stories from different times and places. Gabriel surrounds himself with growing friendships. Sonny with his hammer becomes a friend. The dog, whose name he thinks is Soldier, becomes a friend. Crisp, who speaks in the language of the King James Bible, becomes a friend. Mara becomes a friend and maybe, as the story ends, more. After all, with only one more letter in her name she would be the mother of God, and he could be the first man as well as the annunciator, at least in that other story. Not a bad friend to have if you are a left-handed twin whose role is to put rocks and waterfalls in all the rivers that had always flowed easily downstream before. Not a bad friend if you had invented Green Sweep that eliminated both her family and your own, and turned the Smoke River reserve into an "authentic aboriginal ghost town" (99).

Creation and Destruction

Mara and Crisp tell the story that is central to this book. They tell it while luxuriating in

the watery world of the hot springs where Crisp likes to spend his time. Everyone there is naked as is appropriate for telling an elemental tale. The story they tell is “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky.” It isn’t really a fundamental creation story since it begins with an existing world and an existing woman and a digging stick and a woman’s curiosity. There might have been a man in that world too, since it turns out the woman is pregnant although she’s just ornery enough to have done it on her own. In that other creation story a woman doesn’t get pregnant without at least some sort of divine intervention. What’s creative about the story is that it is conversational, dialogic to use a more academic term. Unlike that other creation story which is a monologue, this one freely shares words and motivations and yes, desires. “It’s a story,” Crisp says, “that comes with the land, and the two are forever wedded” (222). A wedding, at least a good one, is the ultimate in conversational intimacy. The story and the land are in communication. Indians have always known about these things. Gabriel and Mara are waiting for this conversation to happen between them, despite Gabriel’s big mistake. They are both Indians, after all. Their shared stories go back thousands of years.

In that other land in the sky, the woman digs for tubers under the roots of an old tree. Tom calls her Charm in *The Truth about Stories*, but she could also be named Mara in this story. The storyteller easily becomes a storied character as she tells the story. That world is “somewhere high above this plane, somewhere in the black realm of space” (223), but it can be connected to the world we live in, a world the woman helps bring into being. She falls toward a world that is only water, and her fall is broken by water birds, maybe even ducks. There is no land and the only place they can put her is the back of a turtle. They gently lower her down. So this part of the story is not really about creation either. Ducks and turtles and

water and, it turns out, other water beings including Muskrat, already exist. But the story and the woman cannot rest where they are for long. If she can’t go back to that other world, she needs to find a new one down below. Things get even more crowded on the turtle’s back when she gives birth to twins, one left-handed and the other right-handed.

I know the next part of the story really well and have told it myself to lots of people. I heard it from Dane-zaa storytellers (Ridington and Ridington n.pag.) and have made it my own to share. As Crisp tells it, “So our woman calls all the creatures together and announces a contest . . . a diving contest and all are welcome to participate. The first to reach the bottom and bring up a ball of mud wins” (232). The one who succeeds in Crisp’s story, as in the Dane-zaa one, is Muskrat. In the Dane-zaa version a being that lives in the sky has floated a raft on the water and that’s where Muskrat places the tiny dot of earth found beneath his nails. It is a raft instead of a turtle, which makes sense since there are no turtles in Dane-zaa country. In Crisp and Mara’s version, Muskrat places his mud on the back of the turtle: “Don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (*Truth* 29)

Stories have a way of taking strange twists and turns, at least as Tom tells them. Dad and Crisp, a previous generation of twins, had their own moment of creation. As Crisp puts it, “In another time Dad and me were loose in the world, astride the universe with grand designs, him with his assurances and admonishments, me with my appetites and adventures. We believed we was elemental and everlasting” (*Turtle* 238-39). The right-handed twin made things straight and the left-handed brother made them twisted. Dad seems to have disappeared long ago, but Crisp is very much alive, being the fixer-upper.

In Tom’s story it is up to Gabriel, a new left-handed twin, to become a fixer-upper

who wants to become right-handed, to realize his mistakes and try to make things right again. When Mara learns that Gabriel is responsible for killing her family and his own, she tells him to go drown himself, but in the end, she has a change of mind. When he tells her, "I don't want to save myself," she replies, "All right. . . . Then you can save me" (475). An element of Christian mythology floods in, sort of. Gabriel tries to kill himself for having created Green Sweep and causing The Ruin, but finds salvation in his conversation with the woman who tells the story about The Woman Who Fell from the Sky. His own salvation comes from saving the woman he is in conversation with, maybe even in love with, not himself. In the end it is not one twin who is bad and the other good. It is a cosmic union of the two that creates a balance. And on the human level, the lives of Gabriel and Mara promise to come together to create new life. They are likely to be better at it than Adam and Eve. They are in conversation and they are equally responsible for what happens next. There's no snake and no shame in this story.

The Question

On first go round I thought in terms of oppositions, right and left, creative and destructive, good and evil. In this reading of the story, the twins were rooted in their identities as right-handed and left-handed, Dad and Crisp, from a primal generation. Maybe I was thinking of that other story where they were Gabriel and Michael, Jehovah and Lucifer. Helen Hoy gave me some clues: "Right handed isn't good and left handed undesirable. Rather, the balance they create together is what is needed. It's not about driving out bad with good as in Christian mythology" (Hoy n. pag.). So maybe it's better to think about balance and complementarity rather than opposition. Dad is missing but Dog is very much alive. Rather than being dyslexic, he's ambidextrous. Gabriel doesn't really need

to be redeemed for his transgressions. He just needs to relax into who he really is, just as earlier in the story he relaxed in Mara's embrace and felt good about it.

Sonny may help out here. He himself has twin natures. One side is Thor who wields a hammer of destruction. The other side is dedicated to salvage and, as the son of Dad, to salvation. It is Sonny's cobbled together beacon on the beach that brings the turtles back, first Domidion's missing turtle and then the rest: "Already there were signs of resurrection at the edges of desolation" (344). That's a pretty good clue that the Christian story has legs. We can't forget that lots of Indian people have heard that story and made it their own.

Indian stories are not supposed to provide all the answers. They are supposed to generate questions, as the listener makes the circle of stories his or her own. Indian stories provide clues for the listener to become the storyteller. Stories written in books often impose answers rather than generate questions. Tom is pretty good at putting Indian stories into a book without making them canonical. His book can be enjoyed on many levels. First of all, it's just a good story with lots of interesting dialogue and some telling criticism of the damage caused by industrial society. But then again, it's a densely layered and erudite composition of Indian and non-Indian stories. It even includes a nod to the Duck Song, although he may have only been thinking about a joke by his friend, the actor Graham Green (Hoy n. pag.). Folklore is like that. It gets around and sometimes turns up in unexpected places, like the back of the turtle.

The relationship between Gabriel and Mara is still evolving as the book ends, but as characters in Indian stories, they are in conversation. Crisp has a wait-and-see attitude about whether things will work out between them, but Soldier, being a dog, is "known to favour happy endings." The book

concludes as it began, with Crisp and Master Dog in conversation on the beach at Samaritan Bay. Despite his great antiquity, Crisp is happy to tell his companion, "I am well" (518). And echoing him, all is becoming better in the world. Indians and turtles and birds and otters have returned. Even ravens have "returned in force, forever unsympathetic" (517). Sonny is now the one who needs Soldier's protection and nurturing. As Crisp instructs Master Dog, "Look after the lad, for our Gabriel don't need ye anymore" (518).

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