IN TUNE WITH TOMORROW

Christie Harris

WHILE GROWING UP ON A FRASER VALLEY farm, I liked going for the cows. Along the trails from the pasture, I could belt out bits from Tennyson and Sir Walter Scott without anyone but the cows hearing me. And who were they to call anyone else stupid?

My father was the storyteller in our family. Neighbours found amazing excuses to come round in the evenings or on Sunday afternoons. And although his tales usually started with "I mind the time . . . ," we all realized that they were more hilarious than true. At least, my mother used to shake her head over them and say, "What will people think of Ireland?"

Personally, I thought Ireland was great, filled as it obviously was with pranksters, ghosts, "gentle bushes" and deliciously shivery happenings. I also thought stories were great. Clearly, if they had any purpose, it was entertainment. Of course the stories in the Sunday School papers — for which I could hardly wait — did seem to feature worthier characters. But it took all kinds to make a world — all kinds of stories.

Much as I loved stories and enjoyed pouring words on to paper, and made my high school pocket money writing the local news for the weekly *Columbian*, I never thought of being a writer. Teachers said I should be a mathematician. Instead, I became a primary teacher. And now that I had an audience infinitely more responsive than the cows had been, I plunged into story-telling.

It was like a flash from Heaven the day it struck me that *I could tell my own stories*. Ideas flooded in so fast that I could scarcely wait for recess, noon and after school. It was hard on the school's foolscap supply; but at the end of two weeks, I had nine little nothings to offer the Vancouver *Province* for its weekend children's page. And when they took the lot, I knew I had found *my thing*.

By the time I was married and starting to raise my own audience, everybody was into radio. We were all trying to write scripts; and I, at least, was shooting mine in to the infant CBC with a lot more enthusiasm at my end than at theirs.

However, when Vancouver had to produce *A Child's Dream of the Coronation* for the Official Programme on the day of George VI's crowning, they commissioned me to write the book-and-lyrics for an hour-long juvenile musical fantasy.

After that, I went flat out for radio writing: adult and juvenile plays, humorous sketches, women's talks, school broadcasts, whatever-they-were-buying. And it was marvellous. Every domestic disaster could be turned magically into $25; and I was never really convinced that it was juggling a career with five children in a big, inconvenient old house in the country that was turning my hair white before I was thirty-five. Radio was so exciting that I might never have come round to books if Longmans hadn't asked me to turn an adventure serial into my first book, *Cariboo Trail*, published the year I turned fifty. Not unnaturally, my pioneer family on the Trail was Irish, as my pioneer family in the later *Forbidden Frontier* was. I knew how it was with Irish people. I could really see them and hear them as they moved through the plot. So I could make others see them. A basic in writing stories.

When I needed young characters, I could use my own children and the desk full of notes I was making on them and their friends — making because I couldn't resist jotting down the fascinating things they said and did. Children were such interesting people! They were even reluctantly co-operative. "We know you're just nosey, Mom," one of my daughters told me. "But we'll pretend it's because you're a literary lady, and tell you what you want to know."

Later, three of them really told me what I wanted to know about their growing-up. They gave me mountains of taped confessions to add to the notes in my desk. And we all pretended that *You Have to Draw the Line Somewhere*, *Confessions of a Toe-Hanger*, and *Let X Be Excitement* were just fiction. Why they told me the truth on those tapes was explained by my toe-hanging daughter one day when she found the confessing a bit rough. "The kids'll know if it's phoney," she told me. Another bit of wisdom I treasured; you have to be honest with children.

When I meet my young readers on tours, I find they delight in knowing that these family stories *are* the Awful Truth, remembered with humour. And there's no need to tell them about the tears I shed and the gasps I stifled, hearing the Awful Truth from those tapes and wishing I could have done my part over again, better. Yet even remorse is to be treasured; for when you're a writer, no matter what you're going through, part of you is always standing off there, observing how it *feels* to be going through that. Sooner or later, you're going to have a character filled with remorse, or fear, or delight. And you'd better know how it feels because "The kids'll know if it's phoney."

It's one thing to get into the skin of people you've lived with. It's something else again to get into the skin of people of another time, another culture. Yet many of my books deal with the Northwest Coast Indians of "Once in the days of very long ago, when things were different. . . . " I've always sensed that people

are much the same under different skins; it's the code they live by that makes them feel differently about the things that happen to them. Understanding the code of the Northwest Coast Indians, knowing their culture and their homeland involved a total immersion that started for me with a family move to Prince Rupert in 1958.

Then, a series for School Broadcasts plunged me into research; research led me to the tales collected by ethnologists at the turn of the century — tales that seemed to me to match the sophistication of Northwest Coast Indian art; and trying to understand those tales led me to knowledgeable Indian friends. Then, as always, natives were wonderfully generous in helping me to understand.

It was excitement about the magnificent art of Charles Edenshaw that inspired *Raven's Cry*, the true story of a line of Haida Eagle chiefs who were great illustrators of the tales as well as great chiefs. Before I started talking to the family on the Queen Charlotte Islands, I had many sessions with Bill Reid, the superb artist who had agreed to be art consultant and illustrator for the book. It was he who helped me to understand the tragic sense of shame that had overwhelmed a proud, artistically gifted people at the coming of the white man.

By the time I had heard the family stories, and had followed clues through old ships' logs in the archives, I had become so immersed in that world that I began to think I was tuning in on an old Haida spirit. I'd run into something I just could not find out about. I'd go to bed worrying about it. And, again and again, I'd wake up knowing what had happened, just as if someone had told me. When I'd check out the idea, again and again it seemed to be what *must* have happened. But when I mentioned the old Haida spirit to my family, my scientific son said, "Mom, you know that the subconscious is like a computer; feed in enough good data, and it's going to come up with some pretty good answers."

Well, maybe. But I rather liked the old spirit idea. And I like it even better now, when there are scientists who are not all that sure that there aren't spirit beings around us.

It was *Raven's Cry* that first startled me into the thought that the old Indian notions are very much in tune with today, maybe even more in tune with tomorrow. And that's great; it's the adults of tomorrow I'm writing for.

In that book there's the vision of Condohahtgha, the old shaman who went into a trance. His spirit self climbed up the sky ladder, looked down, and saw Haida villages wiped out long before they actually were wiped out by smallpox. I had a little trouble tracking down that story; people were clearly embarrassed about it. "Maybe it was just a dream," they would tell me. At the time, I was inclined to agree.

Then the book came out. And my youngest son, a student in the 60's, said, "Mom, my friends are very interested in that recorded case of astral travelling

— you know, out-of-body experience." They were interested, too, in the part at the end where Bill Reid had said he felt the ghost of Charles Edenshaw *making* him do his Haida art a certain way.

I realized something. Not only was this old Indian occult thing in tune with today; the old Indian reverence for nature was also very right for our ecologically-oriented youth.

The natives had claimed that plants had a spirit self as well as a physical self. So, if they needed to cut down a tree, they talked to it, explaining, apologizing — a practice that was scoffed at as superstitious nonsense. But now, isn't everybody talking to a tree? Aren't scientists wiring plants up to a polygraph and discovering that they can even read your mind?

There's even the odd scientist postulating an invisible world around us, a world of matter vibrating at such a high frequency that we can't tune in on it. But WHAT IF people living closer to nature, people with keener senses heightened by prayer and fasting, by hypnotic drums and dancing, actually were tuning in to ghosts and spirits who really were there? It's a likely enough WHAT IF to make it an exciting time to be working in Indian legends. For me, it adds a whole new dimension. *Once More Upon a Totem* has more spiritual depth than my earlier *Once Upon a Totem.*

But! I write about such things because *I'm* fascinated with them, not because I think children will be. Only after the fact have I discovered that children are just as fascinated as I am.

Maybe we share the "growing edge" my Atheneum editor, Jean Karl, mentions in *From Childhood to Childhood.* "Most good authors are people who need to explore in this way, who are never satisfied with the limits of truth as they have seen them, but who are always searching for the new that lies just beyond." That I believe. And if my "growing edge" ever begins to wither, I may not stop writing; but I'll certainly stop writing for children.

So what about looking at those old tales with Space Age eyes? I've had two sightings of what I know were UFOs. After the second — in that way a new thing suddenly hits something lurking down there in the subconscious — I thought, "The Sky Man of the legends really did come, from Space." In the Northwest Coast Indian versions, he came from the sky and carried off an Indian princess, returning her many years later under marvellous circumstances. And now, when I re-read several of these versions, I was agog over the Space clues I found in them. Why hadn't I thought of it before? But now that I had thought of it, *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* was on its way. Again, I was writing it because I was fascinated with the idea, not because I thought children would be. Though they are.

Those legends have no truck with the Old World's epic battle between Good and Evil — a concept that could be a hangup from medieval Church thinking?

In the native tales, everything has potential for good or evil, depending on what *you* do. And that's an ethic today's children can identify with. They know that if we don't show enough respect for our seas and our rivers and our forests, something terrible *is* going to happen.

It's been suggested to me that I must be into Women's Lib too, the way I make women and girls so important in my *Mouse Woman* stories. But in that matrilineal society, women and girls were important; they carried the great bloodlines. And *Mouse Woman* may be for real. Who knows? Maybe she's still lurking around there, in that fourth dimension of matter, waiting to bring back proper order to the world.

In the old collections, there's never a special story about *Mouse Woman.* I'd been studying them for years before I fully realized that whenever a young person was tricked into trouble, or got himself or herself into trouble, this little character always turned up. I thought about her a lot, and I talked to the late Wilson Duff of the University of British Columbia about her before I agreed with him that she represented the Indian concept of making things equal. Children caught in an encounter with a Supernatural Being certainly needed a friend to keep things equal. And this Good Fairy of the Northwest Coast was such a perky, imperious little busybody that I could use her to bring back some of the fun and excitement I've always felt belonged in those stories.

After all, as I'd always known, stories were basically for entertainment. And they were for everybody: men, women and children. The Indians' tales had been for all ages. As my father's had been. And as I think mine are. I don't think I write only for children. Neither do other people. Although *Raven's Cry* wears a children's medal, the University of Alaska uses it as a textbook on Culture Contact. If a story can't capture the interest of adults, it's not likely to captivate their children.

On one of my tours, when someone asked me how many more books I was going to write, I said, "Oh, one of these days they'll find me slumped over my typewriter."

After the session, a boy came up to me and said, "When they find you slumped over your typewriter, you'll still be writing good stories."

He knew it was the stories that were important, not the storyteller. And perhaps that's all the writer of children's books really needs to remember.