

REVIEW

NORTHERN TALES: TRADITIONAL STORIES OF ESKIMO AND INDIAN PEOPLES

Selected and edited by Howard Norman, 2008. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Paperback; originally published in 1990 by Pantheon Books; 360 pages, introduction, maps, notes, bibliography. ISBN 978-0-8032-1879-6.

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SUMMARY

Howard Norman, an English professor at the University of Maryland and a past finalist for the National Book Award in fiction, has compiled about one hundred tales of various genres from the arctic and subarctic regions of North America and Greenland. He has thrown in a handful of narratives from Hokkaido (Ainu) and eastern Siberia as well. Professor Norman has grouped the tales into eight categories based not on indigenous genres but on their central themes (e.g., village life, origin stories, trickster tales), prefacing each grouping with an essay that explains what the stories from the various regions have in common. The introduction and prefaces discuss some of the issues that are important in considering indigenous oral tradition: the underlying worldview of indigenous societies, spiritual and physical relationships between people and animals, repercussions of breaches of taboos, the nature of trickster characters, the importance of social connections, and the reestablishment of harmony as a plot focus. Each story (with a few exceptions) is referenced to a printed source. A few narratives that are apparently transcriptions from recorded sessions are not identified by date, interviewer, or the context in which the recording was made. A comprehensive bibliography completes the volume.

DISCUSSION

I was surprised not to have encountered this book before. It was originally published as one in a series within

the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library, a trade publication. Despite its nonacademic origins, the book's sources are the standard ethnographies and folklore collections that are familiar to Alaska anthropologists and folklorists (e.g., Edwin Hall, Waldemar Jochelson, Richard Nelson, the Alaska Native Language Center, Osgood, Fredson, Cruikshank). A spot check indicates that Norman has reprinted the stories verbatim from their original sources without embellishments or stylistic changes. In addition to mining the literature available as of 1990, the editor added narratives he obtained from research of his own in Canada.

This collection's greatest strengths are well-written and thoughtful editorial comments and the cultural breadth of the selections within the context of northern societies. The book is best suited for an educated nonspecialist audience with an interest in world folklore motifs (though the editor does not tie the selections into a motif index). It is not particularly well-suited for use in an academic setting for several reasons:

- The stories are taken out of cultural context. For instance, although the editor speaks to several representative occasions in which the narratives might be recounted, his information is general rather than tied to specific events, locations, or situations. In addition, the reader is left to infer cultural beliefs and understandings from the stories, rather than having them explained at the outset. This approach is not a fatal

flaw in itself, but with several dozen cultural groups represented in the collection, the reader is left with far too much work to do. A little more guidance would have been helpful. When, for instance, is a story thought to be humorous by the storyteller? What is the attitude or affect of the storyteller when recounting a particular tale? Two examples from Alaska illustrate how the dearth of cultural information decreases the book's instructional value: first, an Inupiaq story about a grandmother and her orphaned grandson would be far richer if the editor had explained that this is a culturally meaningful duo in a predictable situation; and second, a John Fredson story about Wolverine is reprinted without an explanation of the special place Wolverine holds in Athabascan cosmology, his particular personality, and his unique spiritual powers.

- The collection makes no reference to folkloric conventions of motif or structure; that is, there is no meta-folkloric element to the volume.
- A number of important issues are absent in the editor's discussion. Among these are differences between oral and written lore, intellectual copyright, narrative frame, the storytelling event as a generative experience and time-bound performance, and indigenous narrative genres.

- The lack of an index and footnotes—ameliorated somewhat by the helpful list of sources at the end of the book—decreases the book's scholarly utility.
- Nearly all of Norman's sources are written. In a few cases, they were written by the original storytellers, but in most they consist of translations or paraphrases of original stories that were supplied by the researchers rather than storytellers.
- The editor has provided us with no indication of his criteria for including a story in the collection. The seeming arbitrariness is illustrated by the curious lack of coastal Tlingit lore—certainly among the best documented of any in Alaska.
- The book is attractive and illustrated with line drawings that are based on designs taken from the publication *Crossroads of Continents*. Unfortunately, the illustrations are not tied culturally to the stories. For instance, a Dena'ina story is accompanied by a Bering Strait bow drill design and a Nunivak Island seal drawing. In addition, I found a few minor typographic errors (Asen Balikci's name is misspelled, for instance).

In all, this is a book that would be a fine gift to a lay person, and the editor's nine essays would make a useful collection for a freshman college class that is beginning an exploration of indigenous folklore and oral tradition.