

information

Legends and Stories: Part of an Oral History

The wind howls, blowing the snow that has been falling for three days. The nights are long and cold now. But inside, a warm fire lights the faces of the people gathered around it, throwing dancing shadows behind them. The children listen to a man with long grey hair who tells them of when the Windigo came.

Afterward, he tells another story which combines entertainment, history, lessons, and food for the spirits of his listeners.

The children learn without being told the answers. They must draw conclusions on their own, because one day they will be the storytellers.

When the children finally fall asleep, the image of the Windigo remains with them, creeping into their dreams. It is a frightful, huge spirit creature with a heart made of ice, that is capable of pushing trees over with its bare hands. Its howl is like the winter wind, its hunger great. Some people say it comes as an ice skeleton or comes covered in bark, pine needles, and moss, while others say it is a person with the spirit of the Windigo inside. But the children, although frightened by the thought of it, come to understand why it came. They will remember to respect nature and take no more than they need from the



forest, lest they call the Windigo to return once more.

The stories differ from nation to nation, but Windigo visited many First Nations, and some voyageurs. When people are greedy and take too much from the land, you can still hear its roar in the forest and you will, from time to time, find trees pushed over where it passed.

It is nothing like Nanabush, a mighty magician and trickster of the Ojibwa people who taught many lessons. As much as he was powerful and clever, he was also good at getting in trouble, such as when he persuaded the geese to carry him south for the winter. Upon returning, he disobeyed the geese and looked down to the earth, and suddenly



found himself falling. Luckily, he landed on something soft — a bear just awakening from its winter sleep.

In his tricks and errors there are lessons. Nanabush teaches much about birds, animals, trees and the world — including its creation. Some stories explain why things are the way they are, such as the Iroquoian story

of why the rabbit and owl look the way they do.

The Creator was making each wild creature as it wished,

fashioning the rabbit's long ears

and long fast legs, but the owl was impatient.

It wanted to be the most beautiful bird, and interrupted the Creator who had given the rabbit its long ears and only its long back legs. When the owl insisted on how it should appear, the Creator grew angry and gave it the opposite of what it asked, making its eyes wide, its feathers dull, its neck short, and its song drab. Rabbit, frightened by the Creator's anger with the owl, fled before he had all of what he requested and forever hops on long back legs.

Legends tell us that when people of the West Coast disobeyed Raven, they were punished. There came a great flood, when the tides climbed higher and higher until only one family remained clinging to a mountain top, eating the few fish they were able to catch. When the waters fell, they were able to travel back to their homeland in the one canoe that had not been destroyed. They became the Haida people, listening to and obeying Raven.

The Bella Coola explain how the scattered islands on the West Coast came to be in a story of how the people once grew selfish and did not help

one another. An uncle, thinking to rid himself of the surviving son of his brother, left the boy to drift in a canoe, but the eagle people found the child and raised him. He grew big and strong, and the eagle people taught him to fly. Eventually, he returned to his people and swooped down on his selfish uncle. All the people of the village clung to each other in fear,

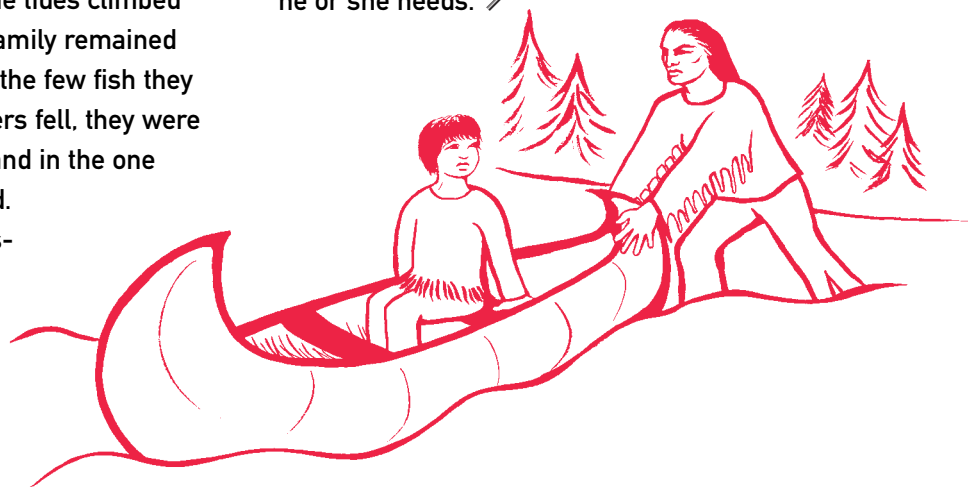
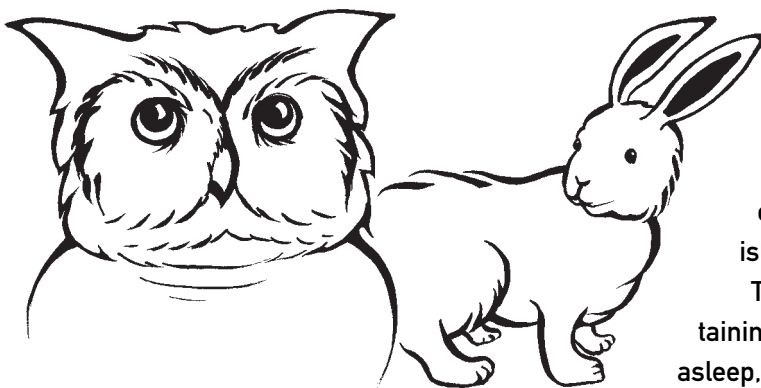
only to be lifted away.

As the eagle-man with the people flew off across the water, the people fell one by one, becoming scattered islands in the ocean.

The stories may be entertaining, but as the children fall asleep, they know how many

things came to be and they know their history, one that has been passed through countless generations, told by the storytellers that they will one day be.

From the creation of the people, animals and land through to lessons on life, the First Nations have many stories that perhaps sound as unusual to some as the story of when monkeys became people does to others. The stories are said to be food for the spirit — seeds planted in each person that one day come to life, preserving the First Nation's culture. And in the teachings, each person finds the lesson he or she needs. /



This information is also available on the Internet at: <http://www.inac.gc.ca>.