



A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World

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The Haida world is a misty archipelago a hundred stormy miles off the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska. For more than a thousand years before the Europeans came, a great culture flourished on these islands. In 1900 and 1901 the linguist and ethnographer John Swanton took dictation from the last traditional Haida-speaking storytellers, poets, and historians. Robert Bringhurst worked for many years with these manuscripts, and here he brings them to life in the English language. *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* brings a lifetime of passion and a broad array of skills—humanistic, scientific, and poetic—to focus on a rich and powerful tradition that the world has long ignored.

A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World Details

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Barnaby Thieme says

Bringinghurst has expended enormous care in creating this marvelous collection of translations of myths and legends from the Haida people, many of which were carefully transcribed a century ago by folklorists and ethnographers working in the Pacific Northwest. Other accounts of comparable material that I've read pale in comparison to his precise and sparkling renditions.

Of considerably less value to me was the meandering miscellany of observations that constituted the voluminous running commentary tying these tales together. Valuable historical, biographical and interpretive material is sometimes lost in a sea of semi-random comparative speculations that I found too personal, and of mediocre quality. Some of his digressions were vexing, such as Bringinghurst's indefensibly hostile account of Franz Boas, whose contributions to the study of the region are incalculable, and who wrote with an animated and humanistic love of peoples that remains unusual and inspiring to this day.

My method, then, is to skim the copious and somewhat-self-indulgent commentary and move on to the thrilling and superbly-rendered translations which communicate the magnificent insight and artistry of the Haida oral tradition. The spiritual and human values of the stories are conveyed much more effectively in these treatments than you get in the typical synopsis, which often focuses on concerns of social economy.

The skill and power of the translations easily suffice to make this a study of First Nations peoples of the first rank.

Ronald Wise says

A study of the efforts of ethnologist John Swanton to record the stories of the Haida people of British Columbia and Southeast Alaska. While the body of the book focuses primarily on the content of stories themselves (with untranslated and translated samples), there is a substantial description of Swanton's methods, concerns, and interactions with the Haida. The introductory materials and appendices provide a wealth of interesting information regarding the linguistic characteristics of the Haida language and its representation in print.

Stefan says

A Story As Sharp As A Knife was a sweeping, epic work of history that explored how a small group of anthropologists, historians and academics wrote down a large number of Haida myths and translated many of them into English at the beginning of the twentieth century. Robert Bringinghurst did a marvelous at describing the personalities, ideas and times of these men and their Haida counterparts. Bringinghurst also succeeded at using a entertaining writing style to make large amounts of complicated information readable and accessible.

Derek Pyle says

Read it aloud with friends like story tellers. These words are meant for hearing, not for reading!

Read it through and it meant nothing. Lots of linguist stuff that meant nothing. Skipped some of it to be honest, this is a big book.

Re-read about 100+ pages. Damn this stuff is cool! It took some time to get, but wow. Awesome. The world is as sharp as a knife...it's going to cut us up and fuck us up no matter what, so we don't need to do any extra cutting. Be cheerful and generous instead.

Alex Kennard says

Robert Bringhurst's extensive discussion of Haida storytellers (or poets, depending on how much you agree with Bringhurst) is an impressive achievement. He translates the words and lives of Haida artists Skaay and Ghandl with compassion and his tell-tale ear for the beauty of the English language. I'd give the first edition four stars.

I've given the second edition three because Bringhurst decides to respond to critics' valid concerns regarding appropriation by saying "that's not how I was taught by my Haida teacher" in a new afterword. Rather than engage with the criticism and meaningfully contribute to the larger discussion it comes from, Bringhurst instead elects to simply re-state his belief that appropriation isn't all that serious a thing to discuss. Very disappointing.

Peter Crofts says

I've tried to write a review of this several times now but always gave up in frustration.

The myths themselves, the story of the ethnologist who first transcribed them from oral recitations and the information provided on the sad history of the Haida in the 19th century is all first rate. The myths themselves are magnificent. Like nothing I've read before. This doesn't only have to do with where they come from but, perhaps, when they come from. Bringhurst provides no thoughts on just how old these myths may be, which is a major flaw with this text, but they strike me, due to the immersion of man in a very lush, deep natural world as much older than the bronze age myths most of us are used to. From that perspective, this book may be a door into another world. One that I can't stop going back to. I've read the myths themselves countless times over the last couple of years and they are still as fresh and vital as when I first discovered them.

The problem with the volume is Bringhurst's meandering, pretentious scaffolding. Which, for the most part, does nothing to bring the texts into sharper focus. There is little to no attempt to provide the sort of essential information necessary to probe beneath the surface of the stories. He spends (actually I think he wastes) lots of time trying to find models of expressive organization within the Western artistic tradition to assist the reader make sense of them. Firstly, they make perfect sense and are rather hypnotic on their own. Secondly, the models he chooses, based primarily on Baroque and Classical music strike me as an excuse for him to show off his learning. Which isn't particularly accurate when it comes to sonata or suite form in the first

place.

So, by all means, get ahold of this text for the myths and the story of the Haida. You can safely ignore at least a third of it and probably come away from the experience all the more impressed.

This is the first of a three-volume series. It's the one, supposedly, that provides you with the necessary tools to encounter the further two volumes which are chiefly translation. What a shame Bringhurst can't be bothered to offer cultural detail and instead seems to be intent on self-preening.

Chris McCracken says

This book is mostly a series of epic oral poetry from a few of the remaining members of the Haida tribe - a native North American tribe living in the modern-day Queen Victoria islands off the coast of Alaska. Robert Bringhurst partly narrates as an ethnographic historian - noting the difficulties and triumphs of the wide eyed 19th and 20th century transcriber John Swanton in his obsession with getting down the massive series of poems the breadth and depth of which he likened to the Odyssey, Iliad, or the Bahagavad-Gita. Bringhurst translates the difficult Haida language with the precision of a sharp eared linguist and infuses his western poetic soul into the poetry. The myths are subtle and range from creation stories to family histories to classic trickster myths. They are difficult to read at first, probably as they were never intended to be written, but as with any great work of art they teach the reader how to read them. Beautiful and important. Changed my life and my outlook on literature and art.

Lea Taranto says

One of the most engrossing academic texts I have had the pleasure of reading, and that manages to do justice in its description, appreciation and study of the great oral Haida literary tradition. I hope just like Bringhurst that some day soon (yesterday is not soon enough) more schools will study the great epics of Raven Travelling and The One They Hand Along alongside well known counterparts like the Oddessy or the Mahabharata. My only regret was that this first book out of three did not have more content in myth alongside all of the eloquent and passionate commentary.

Al says

Brilliant dissertation on Haida oral myth/story telling tradition. Bringhurst's deep research into the available material assembled by John Swanton in the late 19th and early 20th century brings to life the artistry of the last of the great Haida myth tellers, Ghandl and Skaay, and the almost forgotten stories of their culture. Bringhurst rightfully and convincingly demonstrates that they rightfully belong up there with the literary and artistic greats of history. I particularly liked how Bringhurst compares not just Haida mythological tradition but also that of First Nations across North America with the great oral myth/story telling traditions from around the world and down through history. Will read again.

Robert Costic says

What I really love about this book is that the author brings history, sociology, linguistics, and literary analysis to bear on the Haida mythic literature so that there is enough context for us to understand it. In doing so, the author also shows us how we should think about myths, literature, and different cultures more generally.

The stories Robert Bringhurst covers were originally collected in their original language and translated by John Swanton a hundred years ago. Swanton's technique was rather unique at the time, because most of Swanton's contemporaries collected Native American stories only in English and tried to extrapolate a generalized story from the culture rather than preserve the individuality of each contributor's work.

Bringhurst describes the process by which Swanton did this, describes the mythtellers Swanton talked to, and analyzes the mythtellers works, pointing out aspects of the stories that are unique to their speakers and general to the culture. Bringhurst spends some time describing the Haida culture generally, its relationship to other nations along the West Coast, and how they were affected by Western culture, religion, and (tragically) diseases.

Graham Oliver says

I interviewed the author of this book here: <http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/cul...>

Really fascinating book that's part translation, part anthropology, part critical inquiry, part historical context... I don't have enough knowledge on the stuff surrounding this book to have a complete sense of it, but the voice was really great for an academic-style tome, even if it did swerve into the "here's why this is so important" deal a bit.

Thomas Vree says

Bringhurst wrote one of my bibles, Elements of Typographic Style (anyone who works with type needs to own and study this book diligently), but the man is an awe inspiring multi disciplinary wizard. Besides being a published poet with numerous works to his name, he is a noted and gifted book designer, studied architecture, linguistics, and physics at MIT, and comparative literature and philosophy at the University of Utah, has a BA from Indiana University and an MFA in creative writing from UBC. His list of accolades is lengthy. In addition to all that, he taught himself to read, write and speak Haida. He claims (and I don't think it's hyperbole) that the Haida myths rank among the great literature of the world.

NinjaMuse says

In brief: A hundred years ago, an anthropologist collected months' worth of Haida stories in their original language. Now, Bringhurst chooses several to translate and analyse from a Western literary perspective,

while illustrating the era in which the stories were collected, and how they came to be recorded.

Thoughts: This is more valuable for the context it gives and the issues it points out with how indigenous stories were recorded and how they're still treated, than for the translations and discussions of the stories themselves. Not that those aren't important too, because Bringhurst rightly points out that these stories are oral literature, and poetry, but, like, he's a white poet who taught himself Haida so... grain of salt. At least.

Anyway, tackling the poetry and stories on their own, first off. The translation reminds me a lot of Robert Fagles' treatments of Homer, in that it's very readable and accessible to people who don't read poetry, but also not the truest to the source material. (Bringhurst provides some passages in the original and I have enough linguistics training to see there are phrases that don't line up, plus, well, indigenous verbs and concepts of agency are very different from English ones and he barely tries to capture things, sometimes.) I did appreciate seeing the stories laid out in free verse and that Bringhurst keeps the cadences of speech. I did not so much appreciate his decision to translate names into English à la "Dances With Wolves" instead of relying on footnotes to do that work for him.

Bringhurst makes a convincing case that these stories should be treated as literature instead of, say, half-remembered myths or recitations, and that they should be given the importance they're due as a result. There's a lot of discussion of how the stories fit together into cycles, and the way the symbolism and structure supports the idea that the storytellers thought about the stories and crafted their telling, and a chapter or two comparing two versions of the same story to really highlight that each teller had his own voice and style. A few times I thought he went a bit far with his thesis, making assumptions or asides he couldn't quite back up, for on the whole, I was on board.

Like I said, though, the most important thing about this book is the history in it and the discussion of early anthropology. Bringhurst not only delves into the mind of the anthropologist through his letters and presents him as a complex person who was trying to be respectful of the Haida though occasionally failing because of his upbringing, but he also discusses early anthropological efforts as both a compare-and-contrast sort of thing and to show how shoddy and racist thinking has resonated through the ages. The ideas that getting the original words doesn't matter as long as you get the gist, and that mashing multiple versions into a One True Telling is appropriate, have been especially harmful. Suffice to say, after reading this, I'm more aware of the questions I should be asking and the issues I should be aware of, while reading collections of indigenous stories, and for that alone, reading this was worth it.

And Bringhurst doesn't just call out anthropology and folklorists. He makes a point of showing how much was lost in the epidemics and how much we can't even know was lost, and how Haida culture, for better or worse, prioritised female elders/storytellers so much that few of them made the written record, and how racism and bureaucracy left these records (and who knows what else) to languish in archives when they should be studied and repatriated. It's as infuriating and depressing and important as his call-outs of anthropology and folklore.

So ... yeah. It's pretty woke in a lot of ways, though Bringhurst doesn't quite live up to his goals either in terms of his translation or his response to criticism, which is ... less holistic or respectful than it could be. (There's a fair bit of "yes but" and "I talked to two Haida people and they said it was okay." And by fair bit, I mean a foreword and appendix.) It's definitely an important book to read if you're interested in mythology, folklore, or indigenous cultures, but I don't recommend it to anyone likely to take it all at face value and not thinking about wider contexts.

Warnings: This is a work of literary criticism addressing Indigenous culture, written by a middle-aged white

man who is imperfect in his social justice and has a tendency to justify himself against accusations with academic versions of “whatever” and “some of my best friends are Haida.” Also, if you can’t handle tactful discussion of colonialism as applied to First Nations people (such as banning potlatches, Christian missionaries, epidemic death tolls, and apathy), perhaps this is not for you. Also also, this includes stories about Raven, who’s known for having non-consensual sex.

8/10

Becky Loader says

What an excellent book! I got caught up immediately in the stories and poems (yes, poems), and the Swan Maiden makes her appearance again. The Haida were sophisticated oral traditionalists and their stories were only written down by one linguist.

Just A. Bean says

Absolutely fascinating and probably better read more slowly or more times than I did. As the traditions are so absolutely different than literature I'm familiar with, I had a hard time getting a lot of them as clearly as Bringhurst wanted me to, I think. What I did get was slightly dizzying in scope, and I feel like I'll need to go back to it.

Bringhurst was also selling his point hard that he was talking about proper art, which was more or less preaching to the choir, but I suppose it did someone good. I should like to hear it spoken, as pronunciation guides elude me.
