Old Myths Re-Imagined:
Indian Tales

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Book Reviews

OLD MYTHS RE-IMAGINED


After spending his youth in his native Spain, Jaime de Angulo went to Johns Hopkins for professional training, then lived for forty years with the California Indians. Among the fruits of this experience are flawlessly technical and footnoted articles which have appeared in *Anthropos, Journal of American Folklore, and International Journal of American Linguistics*. He also found time to think of his children. For them he spun tales in the Indian manner. Good storyteller that he was, he did not aim to be original but merely to amuse. He shamelessly wove ancient tales into his own imaginings. The resulting mixture was stamped with originality after all.

Once upon a time, there was a family: Bear, the father, Antelope, the mother, Fox Boy, and the baby, Quail. Their home was in “a land of many ridges and small secluded valleys, and many mountain lakes with ducks and geese and pelicans and herons and cranes flying about.” Surely a pleasant place. But had they stayed in it, there would have been no story; so they went on a journey. As happens in all good journeys, they picked companions along their way: Coyote Old Man, Grizzly and his daughter Oriole Girl, and Tsimmu of the Wolf tribe. In their travels they met the Flint people who were harsh when they first met you, warm when they got to know you; and their bodies were thin and hard. The Grass people, on the other hand, had flexible bodies and they bowed and waved to passersby whenever the wind blew. In short, the world of our story is one in which human beings are so close to nature that sometimes they almost disappear into the animals, vegetables, and minerals.
Fox Boy, for instance, is boy enough to “have the ha-has” during which he keeps saying, “I don’t want to! I don’t want to!” Yet he is fox enough to wipe his eyes with his tail when he cries. But when he begins to worry who were first people on earth and how the world was made, the boy in him leaves the fox far behind. An enigmatic character is Coyote Old Man. Sometimes he is a clever sage who knows “what’s happened after the before and before the after.” Then he tells tales of long ago: how the Weasel burned the world or how the Doves gave light to the world by tricking the Sun into coming out of hiding. At other times his shrewdness leaves him, so that he is completely baffled by a spell-weaving porcupine, and a louse so annoys him that he dismembers himself. But this should cause no worry as he reassembles himself in time for the next adventure. Because zest is the constant trait of Coyote Old Man.

Our travellers move through a world of unseen powers. A whirligig bug can steal your shadow and cause you to wither away. Then you must call the Loon Women who will heal you by calling on the Terrible Lizard who-lost-all-his-children and hunts-on-Mt.-Shasta. But the unseen powers never become oppressive. The general atmosphere is one of gentleness. This can be seen in Bear’s evening prayer.

In a story like this the sadness hidden in all human beings must appear from time to time. This happens most touchingly in the tale of the two girls who followed their lovers to the Land of the Dead, most austere in one of Old Man Coyote’s songs.

The author has illustrated his book with sketches that have the same texture of fragile whimsy as the story.

After living so long with the California Indians, the late Jaime de Angulo learned to think and feel like them. He was an unusual person, a specialist who was not devoured by his specialty. As linguisanthropologist he could reduce myths to their motifs or dissolve a language into morphemes. But he was sensitive enough to realize that there were many things he did not know. He came to analyze, he stayed to learn. And this is what he learned from his Indian friends: how to see.

Roque Ferriols