Talking at the Woodpile and other stories of the Yukon
by David Thompson

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

When we think of the Yukon, images form in the mind of the Klondike Gold Rush, Chilkoot Pass, Robert Service and Sergeant Preston of the Yukon. These images paint stories of heroes, poets, adventure and the search for gold. Yet beneath such imaginings are others that involve eccentricity and history, if the two can be linked together.

In David Thompson’s book of stories, Talking at the Woodpile, the author begins with an account of the discovery of a mammoth by long-time miner Wilfred Durant in his ongoing search for gold. He tells his friend, William Pringle, about it, and together they dig further and find the body of a man frozen in time. They call him Bear Man because of the tattoo of a bear on his right shoulder.

Bear Man, or Angunatchiuk to the Wolf people, dominates the second telling in the book. It is the story of rivalry between band members and a young man’s sacrifice to save his people. It is a tale of dreams and magic and a young man’s courage. An elder gives Angunatchiuk his interpretation of a dream the hunter has: “Grizzly spirit is powerful. Few men acquire it, for fear they would be unable to control it. . . . The bear in your dream was your grizzly spirit” (27). These two stories pay respect to the First Peoples; they are well written and stirring.

It is obvious that Thompson loves his characters. He works with their foibles, and each character is different from the other. Yet they all contribute to the community that represents a small town, and this rendering makes the reading a delight.

Thompson’s stories are told with a humorous bent that has us chuckling at the antics of his characters, antics we can relate to and appreciate, for we have experienced similar – though perhaps not as outrageous – situations. One such tale involves two friends who, going to the woodpile one bone-chilling Yukon night, decide to see who can stand the cold the longest. Taffy, a neighbour, observes, “There stood Wilfred and William, two feet apart and shivering uncontrollably. Thick ice had formed from their breath and covered their moustaches” (36). The game results in the two men being sent to the Dawson City General Hospital suffering from frostbite.

There is also the moving story of Victor Caldarau, who arrives in Dawson City to live there after years working at the Elsa Mines. His coming reveals prejudice among some members of the community, with one local commenting, “What the hell is a gypsy doing in the Klondike anyway? . . . Maybe he’s here to get more gold for his teeth” (57). Besides facing such unfairness, Victor tangles with the local wood thief, Neill O’Neill, after catching him stealing wood. His solution for Neill’s crime is hilarious and involves a can of turpentine, but the punishment leads to his arrest. After his release, the people who have befriended him visit and find him reading Shakespeare. He quotes to them, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions: fed with the same food . . .” (67) What becomes of Victor and his relationship with the people of Dawson is for the reader to discover.

Partway through the book, Thompson changes narrators. This arrangement does not break the flow but allows us to see that Tobias Gandhi Godwit is the son of Hudson Godwit, who writes for the Whitehorse Star. He is one of the locals. As a new reporter, Tobias has the job of gathering stories and
composing them for publication in the newspaper. He does so by visiting each individual in the area. Through his eyes we meet Brian, who believes in aliens – in fact, he believes his wife is an alien. We meet Chief Daniel, who tells the story of an encounter of the Small People by his father, Copper John. We also learn about the mysterious the death of Bob Harmond, who has a bear tooth embedded in his skull when the RCMP discover his body. Do history and eccentricity go hand in hand? In Thompson’s deft treatment they do, and successfully so.

Thompson is a new writer with a strong voice that is as free-spirited as those of his characters, and one that we should pay heed to. Perhaps there will be another book from which we will learn more of the Yukon and the quirkiness of Thompson’s fictional inhabitants.

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