



Coyote

An imitator and a trickster, Coyote figures prominently in Sinixt oral tradition as a fundamental shaper of the Columbia River landscape

BY EILEEN DELEHANTY PEARKE AND MARILYN JAMES

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE GAUVIN

"Over time, I have heard the story of the Columbia River and how it was formed through multiple tribal renditions. The particular version I tell has roots in an ancient form but is a hybrid of my own making. I explain this as part of my responsibility to the ancient profession of storytelling. To quote Chief Standing Bear from Mourning Dove's book *Coyote Stories*: The stories 'never grow old... [they] are of the mountains, rivers, and forests...They belong!'"
—Marilyn James, Sinixt elder and storyteller

The following is an excerpt from an oral story about Coyote, told by Marilyn James:

This story is about a time long ago, so long ago that there was no Columbia River and next to nothing alive on the landscape. *Sin-ka-lip* (Coyote) was wandering around looking for something to eat, but all he could find was a Coyote's Breakfast: a drink of water and a look around. Then, his radar indicated that there was a beautiful woman in the vicinity. Now, Coyote was a real scoundrel and a scamp, especially when it came to women. He believed himself to be quite debonair but was actually creepy and repulsive. His hair stood on end, he had an uncontrollable thumping of the hind leg and he drooled heavily. So when he saw a beautiful woman named Rain, it was hard to imagine that he had a chance in the world to get her attention. But for all his flaws, Coyote had a way about him. He began to sing a magical love song to Rain. And in spite of herself, Rain fell deeply, head-over-heels in love with the despicable Coyote.

As he sang his love song, Coyote promised Rain a gift if she shared her own gift with him. Knowing that she was irrevocably in love with Coyote and that there was nothing she could do about it, Rain reached into her chest, tore her heart from her breast and cast it down. Where her heart landed and her heart's blood seeped became the headwaters of the Columbia River. As Coyote continued to sing his love song, Rain cradled him in a warm, wet embrace and together, they began to travel across the landscape. Eventually, the two of them found their way into the land of Rain's cousin, Ocean. Ocean was equally as beautiful as Rain, and as soon as Coyote caught sight of her, he was smitten. In his repulsive, gory persona of standing hair, thumping leg and excessive drool, Coyote loped between the two beautiful women, professing love to each.

"Oh Rain...I love you...Ocean...I love you...No, Rain I love you...Oh, Ocean it is you that I love."

Rain was incredibly angry with herself for having fallen in love and with Coyote for showing interest in Ocean. Rain told Coyote, "You promised me a gift if I shared my gift with you...I will hold you to that promise...I want my gift."

Coyote told Rain: "I love you...I really love you...I will give you many gifts that will prove my love to you."

Coyote began taking bits of himself and laying them beside the trickle of water running from Rain's heart, each of these

bits from Coyote's body became a being intricately tied in relationship to that trickle of water from Rain's heart. Kingfisher, Osprey, Eagle, Bear (brown, black and grizzly), Marten, Beaver, Frog, all species of flora and fauna, all species of fish, resident and anadromous. After that, Coyote reached into his spooose (heart) and set down a small piece of it on the land. This piece of his heart became the Sinixt peoples. The responsibility of the Sinixt was to live with Rain's heart, to show reverence to the land every single day, to show respect and love to the source of the Columbia River, Rain's heart.

Coyote told Rain that each spring and each fall his best swimmers would make their way down the water path of her heart to a greater body of water (Ocean) and each spring and fall these best swimmers (this would be spring disbursement of fry—baby salmon—and the great spring and fall runs of salmon) would make their way back to her heart, bursting with love as Coyote's proof that he still loved Rain. Coyote promised that one day he would return to be with her forever and ever. When he returned, he promised, he would make everything all right.

The Sinixt people wait to this very day for Coyote's return. They believe that when he does return, he will fulfill his promise to make everything right. In the meantime, Coyote being who Coyote was, he said to Rain: "I'm going with Ocean."

And Coyote has been with Ocean ever since.

©Marilyn James, a condensed version of Marilyn's oral rendition of "How the Columbia River Came to Be"



THE STORY MARILYN JAMES TELLS is one of many *chap-tiqlk*, creation stories about the Animal People and the legendary times in which they lived. These stories account for what happened when the world was very young. In the many tribes of the Interior Salish culture (the Sinixt, Skoyelpi, Okanagan, Secwepemc, Spokane, Kalispel, Nespelem, Sanpoil and Flathead), such stories were commonly used by elders to teach morals about how to live, to explain biological function or to guide and inform conservation practices. During long winter days and nights, families heard versions of stories about Grizzly Bear, Skunk, Frog, Mosquito, Marten, Chickadee and Spider, to name a few. The stories would be told over and over again, in a way that was spontaneous and yet also predictable. They were humorous and irreverent, but in their own way a solemn reminder of the responsibility of the people to the land.

As trickster and transformer, Coyote is a central figure in the legends of the Interior Salish people living in British Columbia, Idaho, Montana and Washington State. He is the only being among the mythical animals who possesses a demi-god's power, known as *squastenk*. This power allows Coyote to transform himself or another creature or object to escape harm, to suit his whims or to serve himself, which is the case in this story when he transforms Rain's feelings for him into a deep and inexplicable love. Coyote's particular form of power makes

him a central figure in the ontology of landscape and its resources.

The work of Coyote shows itself all over the rugged West Kootenay region, most notably in the abundance of the black tree lichen (*Bryoria fremontii*). This lichen was originally Coyote's hair, caught in the trees when he fell from the top of a lodgepole pine where he had been gathering pitch for a fire. He transformed this hair into an important food source for the People, who pit-cooked the black lichen until it took on the consistency, if not the taste, of licorice.

Coyote has also been known to turn two warriors quarrelling over a woman into mountains. He has transformed inedible objects to edible ones and sweetened the roots growing in one location over those in another. He was the one who first led Salmon up the Columbia River after it was formed. Demonstrating his contradictory nature, he placed waterfalls in some tributary rivers to keep Salmon from ascending past those points. One such barrier to Salmon sits on the final run of the Kootenay River, a few miles west of Nelson, British Columbia. There, beside Lower Bonnington Falls, is a tall pillar of stone known to the Sinixt as "Coyote Rock." This stone reminds the Sinixt that before dams were constructed, it was Coyote who controlled where the salmon swam.

As a prominent figure in many of the *chap-tiqlk*, Coyote is a pinnacle figure whose mysterious and even magical actions often explain the inexplicable. Whether he is good or evil, creative or destructive, generous or selfish, he can exhibit either the highest good or the darkest immorality. Capable of generosity and thoughtfulness one moment and selfish nastiness the next, he is a mass of contradictions.

"To me Coyote actually embodies the human condition," says Sinixt elder and storyteller Marilyn James. "We are capable of some pretty miraculous behaviour, but we can rarely get beyond ourselves to perform at anything other than our most mundane capacities. We almost wouldn't be human if we weren't fallible, frustrating and endearing. Like Coyote."

As a result of the dams on the Lower Kootenay River, the shelves of rock that once formed the foaming waterfalls beside Coyote's Rock sit today like bones chewed bare. The falls are dry and inactive. They await Coyote's return, when everything will be set right: for water, for fish and for the beautiful mountain landscape the Sinixt call home.

"My people like to teach by example," James says. "And there is no better way of how not to be than an extremely good bad example, and that is Coyote."

And us? Capricious, irreverent, unpredictable. And yes, sometimes a good bad example. The mountains of the region are a fitting backdrop for the ongoing work of the four-legged trickster and for of all the people who call this place home.

Note: The transborder traditional territory of the Sinixt, also known as the Arrow Lakes Indians, stretches from the height of the Monashee Mountains to the height of the Purcells, from Revelstoke, British Columbia, to Kettle Falls, Washington. Declared "extinct" as an Indian band by the federal government in 1956, the Sinixt have never ceased to exist as a tribal group, with several thousand people claiming Lakes Indian ancestry in the US. In the late 1980s, a handful of Sinixt people re-established in the Canadian portion of their territory to protect burial sites in the Slocan Valley, which have been threatened by road-building. □

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