

The Punishment & of the Stingy

Other Indian Stories



George Bird Grinnell

Introduction by Jarold Ramsey

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INTRODUCTION

by Jarold Ramsey

George Bird Grinnell is one of the indispensable men of the American West, a man of so many timely parts and good offices that it would be beyond us to invent him, as the saying goes, if we had to. How one man, born in Brooklyn in that auspicious year 1849, turns out to be a paleontologist, a noted explorer, a naturalist, a distinguished ethnologist, a best-selling author, a business executive, one of the founders of both the Audubon Society and the Bronx Zoo, a planner and protector of Yellowstone and Glacier national parks, long-time editor of *Forest and Stream*, a famous big-game hunter and friend of U.S. presidents, and a pioneer conservationist who among other accomplishments brought about the federal regulation of America's migratory game birds—how one life manages to cover so much so well is a great mystery, and it is tempting to think of this career and a few others like it as representing a peculiar nineteenth-century American mystery of opportunity and energy.

Indeed, it takes nothing away from Grinnell's magnitude to observe how closely his achievements were factored to the special openings and closings of his own age. As John F. Reiger has written, none of the man's considerable native talents and advantages were to be as important to him "as the fact that in a little more than a decade, he had witnessed the passing of the Great West."¹ In the mythologies of the Plains Indians that Grinnell

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knew intimately, there is a narrative formula known as “the lightning door.” A hero, en route to his adventures, manages to get ahead of lightning and rides or leaps through its magic portal unscathed. So Grinnell: it was his fortune (and one imagines his burden) to experience at first hand in action the aboriginal West, and the course of the mountain men through it. But the wonderful door that opened for him in 1870, as a member of Yale Professor Othniel Marsh’s great Darwinian geological expedition west of the Platte, had closed forever, he saw, by 1883—railroads and telegraph lines stitching the prairies, the buffaloes gone, fields plowed and fenced, reservations and agencies, Omaha, Lincoln, Denver . . . How had it all passed? As suddenly and terribly as lightning.

One of Grinnell’s great virtues as a conservationist (in the best and broadest sense) is that he kept his tragic vision of the Old West steady and whole, without sentimentalizing or exploiting it. Thus, in his forty years of ethnographic study and writing among the Pawnees, Blackfeet, Cheyennes, and their neighbors (“field work” hardly describes it), he never utters a “Lo the poor vanishing redskins”—although he keenly and often eloquently records what is being lost from the old ways of the tribes. Here is Grinnell explaining to Chief White Eagle why he is visiting the Pawnees in 1888 (a visit that no doubt yielded some of the stories in this book): “Father, we have come down here to visit the people and to talk to them; to ask them about how things used to be in the olden times, to hear their stories, to get their history, and then to put all these things down in a book, so that in the years to come, after the tribes have all become like white people, the old things of the Pawnees shall not be forgotten.”²

Happily, today’s Pawnees have not “all become like white people” by any means, but in the years since Grinnell

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nell wrote *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk Tales* and his other books, the value of his kind of practical historical conservancy has been amply confirmed. They continue to be the most widely read books of their kind; they have served us well, Anglos and Indians, scholars and general readers.

This is not to say that Grinnell's writings are without limitations. A movement is now underway in literary and anthropological circles to reexamine the mythologies of the North American Indians and bring about their recognition as literary art. Looked at from the rigorous perspectives of this "ethnopoetic" movement, in which ethnology, philology, linguistics, and semiotics all play a part, it must be conceded that Grinnell's "Indians stories" leave something to be desired on the score of textual authenticity. They were told and transcribed, first of all, in English, already one remove from the classical circumstances of their tribal existence. Although he knew the Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Pawnee languages, Grinnell was not a linguist, and he offers no native-language texts; it is impossible to know what has been lost from, or added to, the narratives as the Indians knew them. To someone who is familiar with the Plains repertoires from other sources, Grinnell's texts are notably lacking in bawdy and scatological elements—did his Indian raconteurs censor themselves on his behalf?

In each of his prefaces, Grinnell insists upon the scrupulous rendering of the stories *as told*; and as long as we acknowledge what is surely lost in them of native style and texture, there is no reason to doubt him. They are faithful, for example, to the native fondness for magical narrative repetition; Grinnell knew, as most editors of his time did not, that for an event to happen four or five times in succession was to native audiences not an exercise in

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tedious emphasis, but rather an important structuring of the story. Likewise, his stories are faithful to the native oral-narrative conventions that apparently precluded flashbacks, interruptions, shifts in point of view, authorial intrusion, or other narrative disruptions.

One does wish, given Grinnell's uniquely friendly relations with his favorite tribes, that he had revealed more about the circumstances of the story-recitals he heard, and about the dramatic methods of the recitalists. But against these obscurities it is only fair to set the appealing directness and vividness of the stories themselves—if not recreations of what the Indians heard and cherished, they do read like what skilled narrators might make of their complex traditions for a trusted Anglo friend, in English. And, as generations of scholars and general readers can testify, they are wonderfully rich in cultural details, superbly rendered *in action*—the well-bred shyness of the Piegan girl who encourages her poor suitor but also says, “And now go; people are looking at us” (p. 204 in this book); the origins of the ritual connection of corn and buffalo among the Pawnees (pp. 69–70); the ministrations of a Blood medicine man in “The Blindness of Pi-wâp-ōk” (pp. 144–47).

The distinguished anthropologist Ruth Bunzel has written in praise of Grinnell's books on the Cheyennes that in reading them “one can smell the buffalo grass and the wood fires, feel the heavy morning dew on the prairie”³—and in all his writings he manifests an all-too-rare ability to transmit his knowledge of a culture in terms of living details, not systematized facts. Something of the richness of Grinnell's ethnological knowledge is illustrated in a fascinating article he wrote for the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1892, in which he demonstrated that a well-known Pawnee myth about a magical person who could “call buffalo” to the hunters was in fact a mythifica-

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tion of a common hunting practice among the faraway northern Blackfeet, whereby hunters actually played on the buffaloes' curiosity to lure them into chutes and corals for the killing.⁴ Knowing both tribes well, he saw that what was practical technology for one had been reimagined as myth by the other—does such a process account for other “magical” features in Indian mythologies?

Grinnell himself never uses the terms “literature” and “art” to magnify his mythic texts, nor does he venture to comment on their possible complexities, or their merits, as literary art. They are simply “tales” and “stories” to him; their value being, in his view, chiefly ethnological and historical. As he wrote, characteristically, in 1911: “When we think that the tales these old men can relate constitute the only history of the tribes we can ever obtain, it is greatly to be regretted that more of them cannot be collected and preserved.”⁵ There is nothing to be regretted, certainly, about his contributions to the preserving of that history: and when his texts do offer something more than cultural documentation—his version of the Blackfoot “Old Man” cycle, for example, is one of the great creation narratives in its very simplicity—we are reminded that the native American myth repertoires were oral *literatures*, sources of spiritual and imaginative power to those who knew them, as well as lore and entertainment.

The Punishment of the Stingy and Other Indian Stories (1901) is an intriguing book because in editing it, Grinnell does seem to have stepped closer to a recognition of the literary merits of his material. First, there is the curious book-trade aegis under which the work appeared: it was the fifth volume in Harper's “Portrait Collection of Short Stories,” of which the first was William Dean Howells's *A Pair of Patient Lovers*. Then, too, it is his only collection to

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embrace narratives from a number of tribes (Blackfoot, Pawnee, Blood, Piegan, and the Northwest Chinooks, far out of his usual territory), a detail that suggests in itself other than ethnographic purposes; and he seems to have selected and arranged the texts in anthology fashion according to the related themes of stinginess and generosity, and the emergence out of obscurity of plucky, generous young heroes—native analogues, as it were, to the Horatio Alger formula.

The style, however, is consistent for the most part with the two tribal collections he had already published, on the Pawnees and the Blackfeet—that is, simple, direct, untextured. If we are nowadays inclined to regret, in the name of ethnopoetics, the exclusion of authentic details of style-in-performance, we have cause to be grateful that Grinnell, unlike most of the popular anthologists of the time, refused to embellish his materials or to impose a false Anglo literary manner on them. A glance at the mannered Victorian style of the contents of Daniel Brinton's various native collections, or the stories of the Sioux author Charles Eastman in *Red Hunters and the Animal People* (1905), will underscore the plain virtues of Grinnell's method in this and his other collections.

If Grinnell's work has its own integrity, it also bears an authentic relationship to the corpus of native American traditional literatures as we know them from other sources. That relationship can be seen in the following notes:

"The Blue Jay Stories"—Clatsop Chinook

These stories were evidently collected near the mouth of the Columbia River during a trip by Grinnell to the Northwest in the 1890s. Grinnell's laudatory note (p. x) on the work of Franz Boas suggests that these texts may owe something to Boas's *Chinook Texts*, Twentieth Annual

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Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, XX (1894). At any rate, Boas gives a native-language text and a translation of each of these stories, as follows: "The Punishment of the Stingy," *Chinook Texts*, cf. Boas pp. 132 ff.; "Bluejay the Imitator," *ibid.*, pp. 172 ff.; "Bluejay Visits the Ghosts," *ibid.*, pp. 153 ff.

Comparison of the two sets of texts reveals Boas's to be much more difficult to read according to Anglo narrative conventions, but likewise much more expressive of a distinctive native literary style. (Boas's informant, Charles Cultee, was in fact a gifted storyteller, a literary artist in his own right.) One of these "trickster" stories, "Bluejay the Imitator" in Grinnell's version, follows a widely distributed Indian comic narrative motif, "The Bungling Host"; see examples and citations in Stith Thompson, ed., *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

"The Girl Who Was the Ring," "The Star Boy," "The First Corn," and "The Grizzly Bear's Medicine"—Pawnee

For versions of "The Girl Who Was the Ring" and "The Star Boy," based on transcriptions from the Pawnee language, see George A. Dorsey, *Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, vol. 8 (1904), pp. 254 ff. and 60 ff., respectively. The "Star Boy" motif is widespread on the Plains; see N. Scott Momaday's Kiowa telling of it in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970).

"The First Medicine Lodge"—Piegan

See Grinnell's very detailed Blackfoot version, "Scarface," in *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*, pp. 93-104. In this version, the rags-to-riches hero becomes a star in the sky, rather than just a permanent guest in Sun's house. For

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another Piegan telling of this popular story, see Clark Wissler and D. C. Duvall, *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 2, (1908), pp. 61–65. Apropos of such intertribal variations, characteristic of oral literatures in general and of Plains Indian traditions in particular, Wissler and Duvall quote a Blood storyteller: “The venerable old man pulled up a common ragweed, saying, ‘The parts of this weed all branch off from the stem. They go different ways, but all come from the same root. So it is with the different versions of a myth’ ” (p. 5).

“Thunder Maker and Cold Maker,” “The Blindness of Pi-wáp-ok,” “Ragged Head,” “Nothing Child,” “Shield Quiver’s Wife,” “The Beaver Stick,” “Little Friend Coyote”—Blackfoot

These stories come from Grinnell’s extensive association with the Blackfeet (after 1895 he was U.S. commissioner for their affairs), but the second and third stories feature Blood, and Nez Perce and Piegan, protagonists, respectively, reminding us again of the extensive dissemination of stories, motifs, and characters between tribes. A short variant of “The Beaver Stick” is given by Wissler and Duvall, in fact, as a North Piegan text (*Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*, pp. 76–77). Apart from the Scarface story and an analogue of “The Beaver Stick” (“The Beaver Medicine,” pp. 117–24), there is little overlap between these narratives and those in Grinnell’s *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*.

“Ragged Head” and “Shield Quiver’s Wife” are naturalistic in their details and appear to be historical narratives, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, when the

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Plains and Rocky Mountain nations (and the Nez Perces and Cayuses of the Far West) were devoted to conducting daring raids on each other for horses and glory. For a typical narrative of this sort (Cayuse), see "How Fish-Hawk Raided the Sioux" in Jarold Ramsey, ed., *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), pp. 25-27.

For readers interested in placing these stories comparatively within the general field of native American mythology, the best comprehensive gathering of myth-narratives is still Stith Thompson's *Tales of the North American Indians*. Thompson's bibliography is especially valuable as a survey of scholarly work done among the Great Plains Indians by Grinnell's contemporaries. The aims and methods of the work now underway on Indian texts as literature are illustrated in Karl Kroeber, ed., *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian: Texts and Interpretations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). Dell Hymes's "Discovering Oral Performance and Measured Verse in American Indian Narratives," *New Literary History* 8 (Spring 1977): 431-57, is already a classic in this new field of literary interpretation.

The history of the Plains Indians as we have it would be unthinkable without the keen eye and honest, diligent pen of George Bird Grinnell. With him, it is still possible after eighty or one hundred years to leap through that historical lightning-door that shut so suddenly on the Old West. Amongst the heroic Pawnees, Cheyennes, Blackfeet, and their neighbors of long ago, stories like these will continue to be our horses, and Grinnell our faithful overland guide.

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NOTES

1. John F. Reiger, ed., *The Passing of the Great West: Selected Papers of George Bird Grinnell* (New York: Winchester Press, 1972), p. 152. For Grinnell's role as a pioneer conservationist, see Reiger's *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (New York: Winchester Press, 1975). Professor Reiger is now (1981) writing a biography of Grinnell.

2. *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* (1889; reprint ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 5-6.

3. Ruth Bunzel, in Bunzel and Margaret Mead, *The Golden Age of American Anthropology* (New York: G. Braziller, 1960), p. 114.

4. "Development of a Pawnee Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 5 (1892): 127 ff.

5. *The Indians of Today* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1911), p. 39.

The Stories and the Story-Tellers



THE stories in this book deal with peoples of widely different surroundings and habit—some with dwellers on the sea-shore, whose skies are often obscured by rain and fog, who draw their living from the sea, and are at home on the water; and others with inhabitants of the high plains, where the air is pure and dry, and the summer sun is rarely hidden by clouds.

As the Indians have no written characters, memorable events are retained only in the minds of the people, and are handed down by the elders to their children, and by these again transmitted to their children, so passing from generation to generation. Until recent years, one of the sacred duties of certain elders of the tribes was the handing down of these histories to their successors. As they repeated them, they

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impressed upon the hearer the importance of remembering the stories precisely as told, and of telling them again exactly as he had received them, neither adding nor taking away anything. Thus early taught his duty, each listener strove to perform it, and to impress on those whom he in turn instructed a similar obligation.

In transcribing stories such as these, care must be used to take down just what the narrator says. The stories must be reproduced as they are told; otherwise they lose that primitive flavor which is often one of their chief charms. In their true form they are full of human nature, full of unconscious suggestion as to how the primitive mind worked, and full also of hints as to the customs and life of the people in the old days.

Seated by the flickering fire in Blackfoot skin-lodge, or in Pawnee dirt-house, or in sea-shore dwelling on the northwest coast, I have received these stories from the lips of aged historians, and have set them down here as I have heard them.

The Bluejay Stories



ON the shores of the ocean which washes our northwest coast live many tribes of a hardy, seafaring people. Their houses stand along the beach just above high-water mark, and behind them the wooded mountains rise sharply. The waters at their feet yield them the chief share of their living. The salmon that each year come to the rivers to spawn, the great shoals of little herrings that visit the beach, the halibut that lie at the bottom far at sea, the seals, the sea-lions, the porpoises, and the whales, all provide something towards the tribe's support. Or, if for a while all these fail, there are flat-fish on the shoals, clams in the mud flats, and mussels clinging to the rocks. In the stories told by this race of seafarers, the incidents have to do with the common events of their lives, and the scenes are commonly laid

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on the water or at the water's edge. Thus they treat of the hunting of the sea-lion, of the catching of the salmon, most often of the search for food

Most of the stories to be related here are very old, and date from a period when men and animals were far more closely related than they seem to be to-day; when, as the tales clearly show, each could understand the other's language, and when friendly intercourse between them was common. Although in recent years all the conditions of the lives of these people have changed, stories such as these may still be heard, if one can gain the confidence of the aged men and women who yet retain this legendary lore. In somewhat different form, the Bluejay Stories, in the original tongue, may be found in the Chinook Texts, collected by that eminent ethnologist, Dr. Franz Boas, whose studies of American tribes have yielded such important and valuable results.