

This is a preview of *Journey to Michipicoten*, a novel by Patricia Kay Lucas.
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The Synthesist ***Winter 2020***

Consider the subtle glamour of a journey by birch bark canoe. To cross watersheds and traverse vast tracts, to dance down rapids or float upon mirrors. To see what one has not seen, and then to see again and again what becomes indispensable—wilderness. The skin of the canoe is rough and brown and warm in the sun; the bow, arched like the neck of a swan, slips artfully along some secret way to, perhaps, the head of a portage trail, or a connecting stream barely inches deep. Or the canoe, stalwart and bold, rides the waves of a Great Lake to safety. All these waters form a network across North America, by turns watering and draining the land like the blood vessels of a body. The canoes of the old fur trade went everywhere thereon, only discouraged, but not entirely stopped, by the ramparts of the Rocky Mountains.

Myriad portage trails stitch all of this together. Some of the longest: the twelve-mile Methye Portage between the Churchill and Athabasca river systems; the nine-mile Grand Portage between Lake Superior and the Rainy Lake country. That animals first made these trails is a deep irony. The Indians, and then the explorers, priests, and voyageurs entrenched their use, and indeed, there are many portage trails that lie a foot or more below the surrounding terrain. They are still used in these modern days. That's another thing; maybe we remember the old days by remembering the canoe because, although much has passed away, it is still possible to paddle a canoe to places unfamiliar, even, perhaps, *sauvage*. Mixed up in all this is the allure of long-distance trade, wherever it has figured, which would be most of the globe; think of the Phoenicians, the Hawaiians, the Hanse. Well, let's call it glorious adventure—isn't that really it? Something the imagination grabs on to?

Before the fur trade, the Indians made canoes in as many styles as there were nations and personal preference. These, of course, were northern Indians, whose homelands coincided with the range of *Betula papyrifera*, the white birch. The bark of white birch is peerless for making canoes; it is flexible, strong, water-proof, rot-resistant, and easy to fix. The Europeans, and especially the Nor'Westers, developed their own variations of the native canoes peculiarly suited to the needs of the fur trade. Most famously, the *canot de maître*, the thirty-six-foot flagship, carrying four tons of cargo and paddlers from Montréal to Grand Portage or Fort William, and back. But also the *canot du nord*, perhaps twenty-five feet, still big but nimble enough to maneuver the streams and portages of the far northwest. There were intermediate types, such as the *canot bâtard*. There were express canoes, which were simply any that were lightly loaded and manned for speed. All of them gorgeous to the eye. Here are the words of one supposedly cool and calculating trader, one Malcolm McLeod, describing George Simpson's North canoe in 1828:

The Governor's was the most beautiful thing of the kind I ever saw; beautiful in its "lines" of faultless fineness, and in its form and every feature; the bow, a magnificent curve of bark, gaudily but tastefully painted, that would have made a

Roman rostrum of old hide its diminished head. The paddles painted red with vermilion, were made to match, and the whole thing in its kind, was of faultless grace and beauty—beauty in the sense of graceful and perfect fitness to its end.

I am stopped here for the ninth time this week. There's something about the phrase, "graceful and perfect fitness to its end," that fills me with longing. I wonder if this emotion is an evolutionary adaptation, the restlessness of a species that is never satisfied. I am not satisfied. Despite everything, I still wish to ride that ever-flowing horizon and to swim the deeps of time. Ah me! It is not to be.

Until now, I've thought of myself as an encyclopedist, even though encyclopedism is not generally an activity that leads to gainful employment, *per se*. My purpose has been simply to gather knowledge. I have been working for days now on this entry about the North American canoe, a subject of epic romance to be sure, but the usual approach is not working.

I am suffering from my knowledge; it has become a mob of invested and often competing interests, dangerously confined within an overheated brain. A manifestation, perhaps, of my illness. Nothing that will kill me—please do not think this a plea for sympathy, my dear reader. Yet, this whirl in my head has at last driven me, blinking, into bright sunlight. I am, in fact, disoriented enough to seek your help.

As a boy, I loved to play on beaches and stony shores, where I seemed always to see things I could not explain. Those margins of lapping water, long ago, before the days of fear and complaint. Ever, as a man, have I sought to understand the world around me. Years and years have I done so, and let the sand flow down the throat of the hourglass. Is it too late to change my tactics?

The canoe has led me astray, you see, into a series of exotic landscapes. I find myself wondering how people evolve with landscape, and so make peace with it. And whether this tie of evolved peace is carried around inside us no matter where we go, but is stirred by our return to an ancestral home. And conversely, are we more vulnerable in landscapes where our ancestors never were? (And is there yet time for me to find *my* place?)

Specifically, I am intrigued by the convergence of these elements:

- the sense of place felt in a sacred landscape,
- the evolutionary ties between people and place,
- ancient myth and legend,
- history, as far as we know, and
- synthesis in modern events and people.

I can sense but not explicate parallels between the past and present, myth and legend. Parallels and links that defy common sense, much less description. I long for a time/place in which all of the above tie themselves together into one coherent and functional realization, but encyclopedism is not the means, I am ready to admit, to achieve this. I need a new trick if I'm going to aspire to *synthesis*. I need, even at my age, to become somewhat lighter on my feet. I need to learn how to dance.

What would you think if I brought everything into juxtaposition? An experimental juxtaposition of all the elements bearing on, for example, the relationship between human beings and wilderness? History, art, economics, science, religion. Not only essay, but music, prose-

poem, fiction, doggerel, even—dare I say—World Wide Webbery? What would come of such a concoction? In this fractured world of intractable problems, would it not be worthwhile to try for even the faintest illumination of one question?

I am too old for this. But there's no turning back.

It shall be necessary to recruit assistance, and so, being a bookish sort, my first inclination is to recruit a bookful of characters to portray an adequate range of humanity. I promise to maintain tranquility in the midst of this crew, the better to nurture a sensibility conducive to dancing, to weaving. But key to the whole endeavor shall be you, a gentle reader, I hope, but not a passive one.

No, I am not naive, and yes, it pains me that this mad project is bound to stray into imperfect terrain. So be it. My plans are laid, and there is nothing left to do but to put aside pride and bad habits. I bid goodbye to the encyclopedist. I am out; I am in the sun, humbly seeking partners for the dance. And so, with apologies to all poets and gods of poets, I give you:

No specialists, we—
H. sapiens free,
Compelled to seam
This synthesist's dream