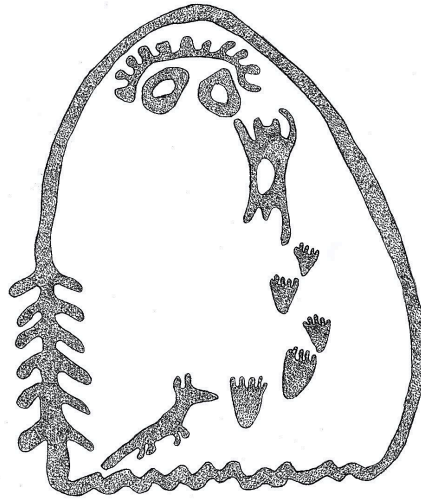
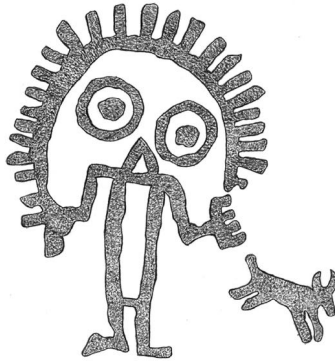


Following Mister Bear

Thomas Doty



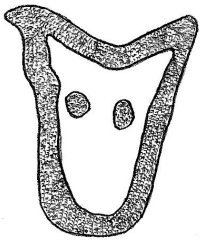
Following Mister Bear



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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Near sundown, Coyote and I stand on the bank of Cave Creek near the entrance to Oregon Caves. The last autumn sunlight sends its gold–red glow into the fall leaves and their reflections shimmer on the surface of the creek. I gaze beyond the colors into the dark depths.

Coyote opens a large buckskin bag and pokes his nose inside.

“What’s in the bag?” I ask.

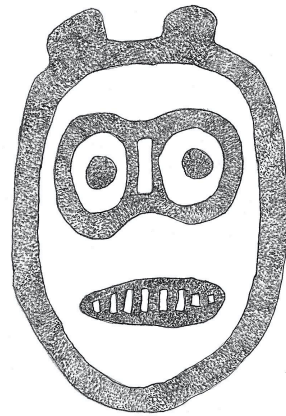
“This is my medicine pouch of magical masks,” says Coyote.

“I thought you got rid of that. How did you say it? Something about spiritually transcending the props of mere humans?”

“Right. Tonight, the bag isn’t for me.”

“Yes?”

Coyote pulls a bear mask out of the bag and hands it to me. “Here, put this on.”



Curious to see what Coyote has concocted for an evening adventure, I slip on the mask. I squint through the eyeholes and watch Coyote remove a silver key from around his neck. Coyote unlocks the cave entrance, nudges me inside and switches on the lights.

Coyote smirks. “The original bear didn’t have it so cushy.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the fall of 1874, at least for the moment. You’re Mister Bear and I’m Bruno the hunter’s dog.”

“I thought the discovery of the cave happened in August.”

“And maybe there was a cougar and no bear.”

“So this is your version?”

“Right. Reality stops here, Mister Bear with Many Tales. Now get moving before I snap my jaws and you’ll have one less tail worth telling about. I’ll give you a ten–count head start. Woof!”

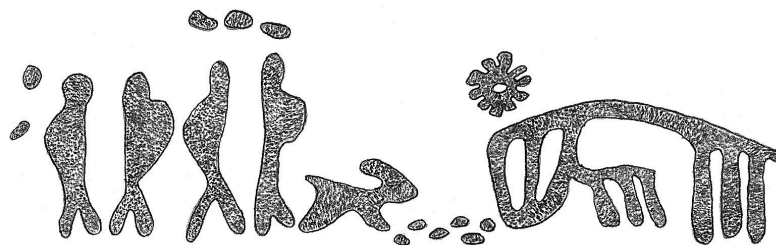
I decide to play along and lumber into the cave. Coyote flips off the lights. He counts to ten, lets loose a fierce howl and leaps into the drama.

I pull a small flashlight out of my satchel and rush ahead. The light makes the damp ceiling glitter and adds a picture to the sound of the creek called the River Styx as it flows through the cave from room to room.

Before the hunter and his dog entered the cave in 1874, this place had its own story. Some 50,000 years ago Grizzly Bear wandered into the cave. Thousands of years later, Jaguar followed. They left their bones inside. Above ground, for several centuries, native people gathered at Big Tree. Night after night, they shared their adventures, their dreams, their fears, adding to the story of this place. A few years ago, Bigfoot was spotted in the woods. These are small pieces of a long story that continues to grow.

I think back to the evening before. In autumn twilight, Coyote and I tramp along the trail to Big Tree. The forest is filled with mysterious movement, everything shifting as the sunset journeys toward darkness ... trees, rocks, animal shapes in the woods. It is easy to fancy them in Mythtime as Tree People, Rock People, Animal People. We arrive at Big Tree at the shadowy moment just before dark.

A few hundred years ago, native people were here stoking the fire. It was the beginning of a storytelling season that stretched from fall to spring. People shared stories at this ancient gathering place until snow drifted onto the ridge. In cold and dwindling daylight, they walked down the mountain trails to their winter lodges to spend long nights singing, dancing, gossiping, gambling and telling stories.



Coyote and I wander along the trail, making our way back to the cave. Faint starlight drifts through trees. The night is nippy with autumn air. We walk through clumps of salmonberry bushes, through groves of alders, mountain maples, hazelnuts, across a meadow damp with springs where mountain beavers make their burrows. A dark shape ambles across the trail, too far ahead for me to make out what it is.

“Isn’t this where that doctor fellow spotted Bigfoot?” asks Coyote.

“Thanks for reminding me,” I say.

We shiver, crowd closer, and stretch our legs down the trail.

I let go of the memory. The bear mask feels snug against my face. I strain to see through the small eyeholes. As I journey deeper into the cave, I try to figure out where I am. Nothing works. I can’t match what I see to what I remember from pondering maps. None of the native names for rooms or formations survive. I feel lost in names that live outside the story I’m searching for. There are names from the Below World ... Devil’s Backbone, Devil’s Washboard, Devil’s Slide, Nick’s Bedroom, River Styx.... Names from the Above World ... Cathedral Arch, Golden Stairs, Garden of the Gods, Paradise Alley, Angel Falls.... Otherworldly names that are earth-bound ... Grave Yard, Adam’s Tomb, Garden of Eden, Paradise Lost, Joaquin Miller’s Chapel.... There are majestic names ... Royal Gorge, King’s Wine Cellar, King’s Palace, Princess Bedroom, Queen’s Reception Room, Queen’s Dining Room.... Names that try to be local ... Mt. Shasta, Table Rock, Bow Battleship Oregon.... Names not so local ... Niagara Falls, Lake Michigan, Banana Grove, Petrified Forest, Washington Monument, Washington Statue, Atlantic Ocean, Seneca Lake, Grand Canyon.... Names with mysteries ... Cave of the Winds, Rat Hole, Chicken Graveyard, Wishing Post, Imagination Room, Ghost Room.... Something about that last one grabs my senses for a moment and slips away.

I shake my head to clear the lists from my mind and run ahead. It doesn’t take long before my imagination plunges me into a story both ancient and new. As Coyote’s vicious growls and barks fade into silence, the chase becomes a journey. I am no longer a storyteller wearing a bear mask. I am Mister Bear of the myths traveling upstream along the great river that is the lifeblood of my native world. My flashlight is a pine torch. Water drops clinging to the ceiling are sparkling stars in the night sky. Each room of the cave is a community brimming with voices. Each voice tells a part of the story, and together they compose a long narrative of the landscape Mister Bear has called home for centuries.

Water made this cave, the slow dripping of water from the soil above, and water flowing underground. A saunter through the cave is a not only a tour of geology but also a journey through a fantasy world of shapes and colors ... white-robed ghostly figures, sunset-colored ropes of flowing rock, a marbled landscape of drips and columns.



I follow the ancient paths of water from one fantastic formation to the next, from one unique room to another. I see a faint light ahead and slow my pace. Coyote catches up with me, and the two of us peer around a corner.

In the room called Joaquin Miller's Chapel, a lanky man in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and six-guns strapped low on his waist addresses a crowd of visitors. A single lantern lights the man and the crowd. Coyote and I lurk in the shadows and listen. Beyond the circle of light, darkness stretches out of sight in all directions. We are deep inside the cave.

"Now I'm not much on caves, even these marble halls of Oregon," says the man. "But this room was named after me and so somebody up top thought I ought to visit the place and have my say. Since a fine bear was sacrificed to open these caves to the public, I thought I'd talk about bears."

"Cool, huh?" whispers Coyote. "Best living history you'll ever see." Inside my bear mask, I nod in silence.

The man's eyes scan the crowd and stop on a young boy. "I was once exactly your own age. Like all boys, I was from the first, fond of bear stories, and above all, I did not like stories that seemed the least bit untrue. As a rule, the modern bear is not a bloody, bad fellow, whatever he may have been in Bible days. I suppose you have been told, and believe, that bears will eat boys, good or bad, if they meet them in the woods. This is not true. On the contrary, there are several well-authenticated cases, in Germany mostly, where bears have taken lost children under their protection, one boy having been reared from the age of four to sixteen by a she bear without ever seeing the face of man.

"I have known several persons to be maimed or killed in battles with bears, but in every case it was not the bear that began the fight, and in all my experience of about half a century I never knew a bear to eat human flesh. For the bear is a shy old hermit and is rarely encountered in his

wild state by anyone save the hardy hunter, whose only interest in the event is to secure the skin and carcass.

“Of course, now and then, a man of science meets a bear in the woods, but the meeting is of short duration. If the bear does not leave, the man of books does.

“I am bound to say that I have found much that is pathetic, and something that is half-human, in this poor, shaggy, shuffling hermit. He doesn’t want much, only the wildest and most worthless parts of the mountains or marshes, where, if you will let him alone, he will let you alone.

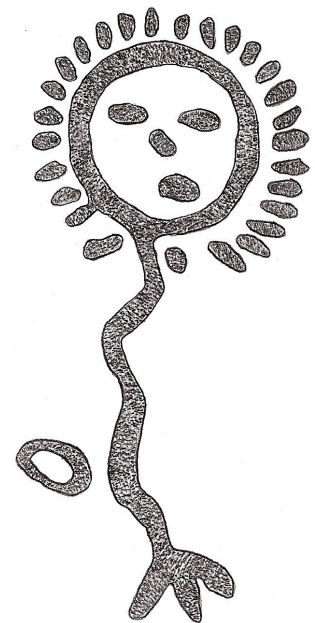
“The bear is a wise beast. This is, perhaps, because he never says anything.”

“Get that part, Mister Storyteller?” Coyote elbows Me-Now-Bear in the ribs, snaps at my heels and sets the chase back into motion.

As Mister Bear I rush through the room called the Grave Yard and into a narrow corridor. The cave closes in. Rock surrounds me. Voices drip through cracks like drops of water. Though they all seem to be telling the story of this cave, different voices tell different parts of the story. One speaks in the style of an Old Time storyteller with words that live in myths and dreams, another cracks with the slow and wise cadence of an elder with a vivid memory, a third voice sounds matter-of-fact like someone reading a history book out loud. Though clearly human, the voices aren’t recognizable as male or female. They are living voices, aware of each moment, and they guide the power of the story the same way a lucid dreamer might direct his dream. All of the voices swirl in whispers up and down the corridor as if they have been living inside this cave for a long, long time and are searching for a way out.

Coyote is nowhere to be seen. I slow my pace to listen to the voices....

Story: A long time ago on a fall day, Boy-Almost-a-Man went fishing for salmon with his five brothers. They followed the river upstream into the mountains, stopping at each of the good fishing places. In the autumn twilight, they started to pack up their catch to return home. Boy-



Almost-a-Man walked on beyond the curve in the trail he had been told never to pass. His brothers called him to come back but he kept on. There was something ahead he needed to see.

Memory: According to my people, Great Bear in the Sky controls the seasons. Brilliant in the night, he lumbers to his left around the North Star. We stamp our circle dances in the same direction to keep the seasons in their proper order. Thousands of years ago, we carved symbols into rock: the foot of a human and the foot of a bear, each on one side of a counter-clockwise spiral. The message reads: Stamping dances to our left keeps Bear dancing the same way.

Story: Boy-Almost-a-Man was drawn into the beauty of the long shadows of evening. He gazed at the last reddish glow of the sunset and the first pale glimmer of the rising moon. The trail crossed a mountain meadow. Near the edge of the forest, he saw the figure of a young woman picking huckleberries. She was as beautiful as the night. Her black hair and dark eyes shone in the moonlight. He slowed his pace to match hers. As she stepped out of the meadow and into the shadows of the trees, Boy-Almost-a-Man followed.

Memory: Able to walk upright in near-human shape, we consider bears to be our relations. Bears are not hunted. To kill a bear is to murder your relative. To gaze into their native-brown eyes is to gaze into human eyes.

History: Elija Davidson is believed to be the first white person to enter Oregon Caves. On a hunting trip in 1874, his dog chased a bear into a hole in the side of the mountain. After retrieving his dog from the depths of the cave, he baited the entrance with the carcass of a deer he had recently killed. In one version of the story, Elija returned the next morning to find the bear fat and sleepy after an all-night feast of deer meat. It was reported that he shot the bear with a rifle that was 57 inches long and weighed 8 pounds.

Story: The woman walked deeper into the woods. Days and nights passed as if they were brief descriptions in a story. The first snow of the new season dusted the mountains. The woman disappeared into a hole near the base of a large tree and Boy-Almost-a-Man followed. The way was dark and damp and smelled of recently dug earth. Boy-Almost-a-Man crawled deeper in

wriggling past tree roots, and into a larger room, empty except for a bed of fir boughs. Tired from his journey, Boy–Almost–a–Man curled up on the boughs and fell asleep. Wild days and nights passed filled with snippets of stormy dreams. When Boy–Almost–a–Man awoke, his mind seemed different. He felt grown up. His name didn't fit him anymore. He listened and heard the spring songs of birds in the forest outside, and somewhere down the burrow, he heard snorting and squealing. He squinted and saw two bear cubs playing, one tumbling over the other. He turned over and saw the shape of a large she–bear sleeping beside him. He tried to think this through but nothing made sense except the urge to go outside and find something to eat. “I will call myself No–Longer–a–Boy,” he whispered. The she–bear and the cubs followed him out of their den and into the bright sunlight of a spring morning.

Memory: When I was young a black bear wandered down the mountains, through the suburbs, and ended up at my school. It was spring, and the day was as warm as summer. During the canceled recess, I pressed my nose to the classroom window and watched the bear. He was smaller than I expected. He loped across the playground, sniffing the merry–go–round, batting a swing with his paw, gazing now and again to the window and locking his playful eyes with mine. Then he crossed the street and disappeared behind a house where police cornered him and shot him dead. I cried when I heard the shots. He had been so small, hardly a cub, no farther along in his life than I was in mine. His eyes were the eyes of a child. That night a haze spread over the sky. The night turned as cold as winter. By morning it was snowing. Great Bear in the Sky had gone back to sleep.



History: On December 16, 1913, Elijah Davidson hauled nine bear skins into Grants Pass, Oregon.

Story: On the first sunny day of spring, the five brothers went hunting. They moved silently through the forest looking for signs of deer, bear, or elk. In the distance, one of the brothers saw movement. He signaled the others. They crouched, their arrows flew, and a large she-bear fell to the ground. No-Longer-a-Boy grabbed the cubs and hid in the woods. They watched in silence as the brothers approached the dead bear.

Memory: Not so many years ago, on the last night of winter, I climbed the rock that is the center of the universe. Stars circled overhead, bright as creation. Great Bear in the Sky had slept the winter. His snoring was the roar of the winter storms, his cool breath of hibernation the winter winds. He had chomped the moon to crescent shape, waking every false spring to snack on the moon and send it through its phases. As we passed the bear-shaped rock at the top of the trail, I patted his nose and whispered, “Wake up, Mister Bear. Springtime is coming. It’s the real one this time.” We lit fires on the flat top of the rock to warm the earth. And we danced slow, lumbering dances, circling counter-clockwise with the nighttime dance of the stars. An old man told the myth of how the world began with a springtime creation when Children Maker made the people. The sun climbed over the eastern hills. Great Bear in the Sky woke up. His breath was the warm breath of spring.

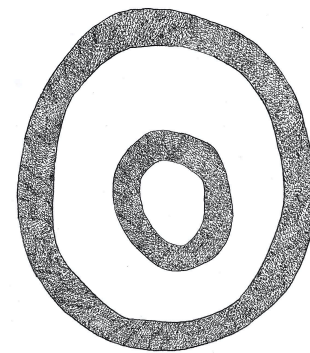
Story: The five brothers skinned the bear and packed the hide and carcass to the village. No-Longer-a-Boy followed them home, carrying the cubs in his arms. All summer in the village he tried to fit in but he was mocked by his brothers. “You’re not a real man! You lived with a bear! Look how those bear cubs follow you around. Are you their father!?” When people from the village went hunting or fishing or gathering food, No-Longer-a-Boy was left behind. One night he covered himself with the skin of the she-bear, crept silently into the lodge where his brothers were sleeping, and killed them.

Memory: In these seemingly un-native times, Great Bear in the Sky has dimmed in the bright lights of our cities. Earthbound bears have left their ancient valley homes to dwell in the mountains where Great Bear in the Sky still blazes, and where the seasons still circle with the intensity of wintertime death and springtime creation.

Story: No-Longer-a-Boy and the bear cubs walked into the mountains to the meadow where huckleberries were ripening. They spent their days stuffing themselves, and the cubs grew and grew. As autumn shambled into winter, they journeyed deep into the woods and dug a new den. Snug inside, they slept and dreamed as mountain snow covered their tracks and filled the woods. In the village, people sat around fires in the winter dance lodge. They listened as a storyteller told — over and over — the tale called, “The Boy Who Lived With the Bears.” In the spring, when the men went hunting, no one thought of killing a bear.

History: In September of 1896, advocating federal protection for Crater Lake and Oregon Caves, John Muir visited southern Oregon. He wrote: “There are bears in the woods, but not in such numbers nor of such unspeakable ferocity as town-dwellers imagine, nor do bears spend their lives in going about the country like the devil, seeking whom they may devour. Oregon bears, like most others, have no liking for men either as meat or as society; and while some may be curious at times to see what manner of creature he is, most of them have learned to shun people as deadly enemies. They have been poisoned, trapped, and shot at until they have become shy, and it is no longer easy to make their acquaintance.”

Memory: Caves are the Old Time homes of bears. Our rock writing symbol for cave is a circle within a circle, meaning hollow, empty, all gone away.



The voices echo into silence as I enter the Ghost Room. I see a large, crouching, almost-human shape. Startled, I drop my flashlight and it disappears down a deep crack in the floor. Even with my flashlight gone, a pale light still shimmers around the shape. Under the mask, my face is wet with sweat.

“Grizzly?” I think. “That can’t be. They’re long gone. And where’s that light coming from?”

I squint through the eyeholes of my mask and bring the shape into better focus. For a moment, I think I see a larger version of myself, perhaps an elongated shadow projected from where I am standing. This is disturbing! I remove the bear mask. I shake my head, and the dim shape is still there. It stands up tall.

A deep voice starts in a whisper as if quietly gathering up voices from other times and pulling them in from the darkest corners of the cave. The voice builds to a growl.

“This old timer takes different shapes in the stories. You may have noticed the peculiar names storytellers have given me ... Brown Bear, Black Bear, Grizzly Bear, Spirit Bear, Mister Bear, not to mention Wild Man, Bear Man, Bigfoot. There are many more.... And those are just names. You should hear the descriptions. Things like ‘black-bearded, half-human, hairy–anything–or–other.’ Whew! Talk about wordy! It takes a real master teller to make me worth listening to. Poke around and you’ll find him. And when you do, track me through a story and you’ll learn something!”

The light goes out. In a swish of air, I feel a paw-like hairy hand reach out and snatch the bear mask as the great shape lumbers past me and heads down the corridor. I stumble forward in the darkness, following the cave trail as best I can, up the long tunnel toward the exit. I try the door. It creaks open. Someone must have left it unlocked. I peek outside. Coyote is already there, warming himself in the morning light.

Coyote smirks as he hands me my flashlight. “I think you dropped this.”

“Should have guessed,” I mutter. “You know more shortcuts than a barber.”

Coyote and I walk down the trail and join a small group of folks who have gathered by the creek near the cave entrance.

One man describes the dark shape he saw emerge from the cave a few minutes before.

“It headed up the trail toward Big Tree. Largest bear I’ve ever seen!”

“That was no bear,” says a little girl. “Didn’t you smell it? That was Bigfoot!”

A man who hadn’t seen it points out that the cave is locked and no one comes or goes without a key. “Have a look for yourself,” he says.

“Phooey on that!” shouts an old woman. “This story is too good to trifle over such puny particulars. Everyone knows that Spirit Bears don’t need keys, or doors!”

Everyone laughs.

“Well,” Coyote says to me. “Who was he?”

“You don’t know?”

“Of course I know. I was there. I’m just testing your recall abilities, Mister Word Guy.”

“So you say.”

“Yup, that’s what I say.”

“You’re not going to offer any doggy insights?”

“I’ll leave those details to the storyteller,” says Coyote. “I’m just here for the story.”



“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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