

'Mother Earth,' long on detail, fails to entertain

"Mother Earth Father Sky" by Sue Harrison (309 pp., Doubleday, \$19.95)

Sue Harrison's publisher, Doubleday, has shelved out a whopping \$100,000 to promote her first book, "Mother Earth Father Sky," now in bookstores.

The novel has received a first printing of 100,000 copies, almost unheard of these days when it comes to first novels. It's been chosen as a Literary Guild main selection. And the author, a 39-year-old housewife and mother from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, is the recipient of an advance in the lovely neighborhood of half-a-million dollars.

The prehistorical novel, set in the Aleutian Islands during the last Ice

Age, has at its center a Native American girl named Chagak. In the book's opening pages, the 13-year-old Chagak watches from a distance, as a tribe of warriors attacks her small village, slaughtering all its inhabitants and burning the village.

ORPHANED AND ALONE, except for her baby brother, Pup, Chagak begins her odyssey of survival and revenge. In time, she comes across a wise old man named Shugan, a carver, who lives alone on an isolated beach. Together, the two see things through to the bittersweet conclusion of "Mother Earth Father Sky."

Along the way, her young brother dies, Chagak is raped by a member of the same tribe who destroyed her

home village and she gives birth to a son, Samie. Eventually, she finds a young man she can love. He loves her, too, and so it all works out rather nicely.

As to the book itself, however, things don't always work out quite so nicely.

Oddly, one of Harrison's greatest strengths turns out to be one of the book's most troublesome weaknesses. The amount of research that went into this book is, to say the least, impressive.

The author, I think, must know everything there is to know about the minutiae of Native American life, in this place at this time. Unfortunately, sometimes it feels as if she's put it all into this novel, inserting "asides" of information so often that a reader tends to be distracted by it all.

I'm not absolutely certain about this, but, thanks to "Mother Earth Father Sky," I think I could build my own ulaq now (a Native American

dwelling dug into a hillside and supported with driftwood or whale bone) repair my own llyak (a boat; sew my own chigedax (a parka made of various animal parts); or weave a nice grass mat. With a little help, I might even be able to get a start on flensing a whale.

I'm not at all sure, though, that such a storehouse of information is essentially what I want from a novel.

What do I want? Well, for starters, I'd like to be entertained. I'd like to be touched or moved in some way. I'd like to be a bit surprised. I enjoy being caught up in a story, gladly suspending disbelief, getting into a novel. I don't want to feel as if I'm out on the fringes somewhere, merely an observer, a feeling I experienced several times as I read "Mother Earth Father Sky."

Ultimately, though, for me, the success or failure of a novel always comes back to its characters.

HERE, WE HAVE CHAGAK, who



book break

Victoria Diaz

is pretty, brave, strong, healthy, nurturing, intelligent, kind and true. Her companion, Shugan, is old, wise, courageous, paternal, loving, reasonable and also kind and true.

The villain, Man-Who-Kills, is dark, dirty, beady-eyed, not very tall (he comes off as almost ludicrous at times). On the other hand, Kayugh, the young hunter Chagak loves, is tall, well-built, clear-eyed and sensitive.

All are recognizable, standard-issue that you've met before. Consequently, they're predictable and not overly interesting and not a real plus in this novel.

The thing is, I had hoped to be whisked away and given a taste of what it might have really been like for a vulnerable, flesh-and-blood child-woman to have struggled to live and to gain some measure of contentment in that strange, faraway time and place.

Maybe that was too much to hope for.

Harrison intends "Mother Earth Father Sky" as the first part of a trilogy which will trace the migration of a Native American tribe from the Aleutians, and eventually to Upper Michigan.

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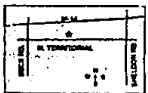
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briefly speaking

MUSIC UNDER STARS

The Livonia Arts Commission's annual summer concert series, entitled Music Under the Stars, begins Thursday with a performance by the Hamtramck Heritage Concert Band, 7:30-9 p.m., on the steps of the Livonia City Hall at the corner of Five Mile and Farmington roads. The band will perform classic and popular music.

The performance is the first of 10 scheduled now through Aug. 23. On Thursday, July 5, the Kasuku Mafia Success Reggae-Calyso Band will perform in the Civic Center Park, followed by the Tommy Baldwin Orchestra on July 12, the Austin-Moro Band on July 19, the Academy Brass Ensemble on July 20 and Feltz & Company on July 26.

In August, the Downriver Dulcimers will perform Aug. 2, Percy Gabriel on Aug. 9, the Livonia Symphony Orchestra on Aug. 16 and Ernest Matchulot on Aug. 23.

For information, call the Livonia Arts Commission at 421-2000.

WATERCOLOR WORKSHOP

The Visual Arts Association of Livonia has scheduled two one-day workshops on watercolor technique, Saturday, June 30, and Saturday, July 7. Both workshops are 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and cost is \$40 for members or \$45 for non members. Instruction includes set-up, demonstra-

tions and critique. Beginners are welcome. For more information, call 464-6772, 421-3207 or 464-6772.

BASKETRY EXHIBITION

Kathleen Crombie of Garden City is the only area artist represented in the First Annual Basketry Invitational. The exhibition is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., today through Saturday, June 30, at Sybaris Gallery, 301 West Fourth, Royal Oak.

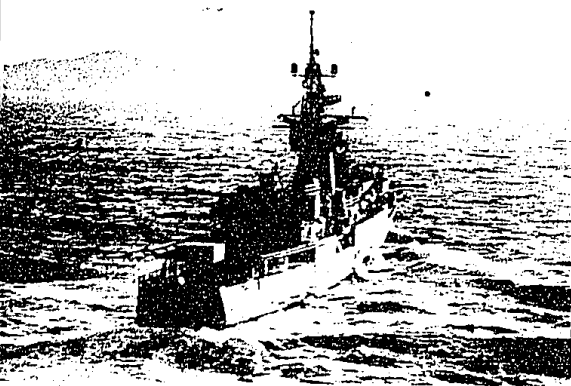
SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra performs for the second consecutive year at the annual International Freedom Festival at 8 p.m. Saturday, June 30, at Hart Plaza in downtown Detroit. Classical and pop favorites, including Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, will be performed under the direction of conductor Stephen Stein.

ART MUSEUM EXHIBIT

An exhibition of prints and watercolors by Sandra Freckleton opens Friday, July 6, at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 525 S. State, Ann Arbor. The exhibit is a major retrospective of work by Freckleton, who is a Michigan native. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, and 1-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

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