# Raven Hangs from the Sky

*The Tlingit · the coast of south-east Alaska*

## Where It Comes From

The Tlingit live along the islands and inlets of south-east Alaska, and Raven is at the heart of their stories: a trickster and a maker, who brings light and shapes the world, often by mischief.

This telling was written down in 1904 by the American ethnologist John R. Swanton, in English and in Tlingit, from storytellers at Sitka and Wrangell, among them a man named Katishan. He published it in *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (1909). Tlingit clans have their own flood stories too, and they vary.

# What Happens

Raven angers his grandfather, Nas-ca'ki-yel, his mother's father. The old man tries again and again to kill him: with a falling tree, a canoe that snaps shut, a burning kettle. Each time Raven turns himself to rock and survives.

At last the grandfather calls down the rain and pours water out of his dance hat, and the whole world floods. People climb into the hills. Raven and his mother climb up the timbers of the house.

Raven puts on the skin of a white bird and flies up to the highest cloud in the sky. He hooks his beak into it and hangs there while the water rises below him.

When the water begins to fall, he lets go and drops onto a bed of kelp. The sea is still halfway up the mountains. Later Raven tricks the old woman who rules the tides into giving the lowest tide there has ever been, and he goes on to make new people from leaves.

## What Stands Out

**Why the flood came.** A grandfather's fury at his grandson. It is a family quarrel, not a judgment on the human race.

**Who was saved, and how.** Raven, by cleverness and shape-changing; his mother; and the people who reached the hills.

**The boat or the refuge.** No boat in this telling: hills, house timbers, and a cloud.

**What came after.** The waters go down, the tides are set, and Raven makes people again.

Swanton heard a second, shorter version at Sitka, in which a jealous husband raises the flood and one man builds a big canoe. He remarked that one detail he heard, animals taken two of each kind, was plainly a Christian addition. That is a good example of a careful recorder trying to tell the old from the new.

THINK IT THROUGH

*Raven survives not by being good but by being clever. What do you make of a hero like that?*

# Sources

John R. Swanton, *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 39 (1909), Raven story no. 1 and notes.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.