

story of a boy and girl, Aglo and Petal, and their growing friendship with a small woman, Petite Mama (only four feet tall, she too might have been a “small-small”). High up on the hill, near the bottomless lake, Petite Mama grows the best fruit on Spice Island. She also knows of the Nutmeg Princess who appears to very few. In time, Aglo and Petal undergo their own tests and by selflessness earn the ability to communicate with the Princess. Soon the Princess and Petite Mama both disappear leaving the plantation to Aglo and Petal, who make nutmeg “the most precious crop on that little island in the Caribbean.”

Galouchko’s painted illustrations in brilliant unrestrained colours depict magically the fruits, flowers, birds and beasts with their supernatural attributes. *Obeah* is in the air on Spice Island, and its power touches everyone, even attentive readers.

Two Central American stories, *The Sleeping Bread*, a Guatemalan tale, and *Pancho’s Pinata*, a Christmas story of Mexico, are persuasively told in text and visuals by their two authors, one of whom, Stefan Czernecki, doubles as illustrator. The stylized, bordered paintings, colourful, highly designed, and flat, remind one of Spanish and Mexican tiles, both the brightly glazed and the calmer terra cotta ones. Both books use the right-hand pages for paintings, the left for text, and in *Pancho’s Pinata*, each left-hand page is decorated with a small cactus motif. Both are extraordinarily lovely, and both evoke Central American village life in the light of an intense faith.

In *The Sleeping Bread* the villagers’ selfish exile of the ragged blue-eyed beggar, Zafiro, results in the baker’s much loved bread failing to rise. Only Beto, the kindly baker, is able to persuade Zafiro to return, and together they discover why the bread sleeps. New bread is made for San Simon’s festival. In the parade the saint looks out through his mask “and his blue eyes shone.”

From all four of these fine folk tales there radiates a judicious blend of magic and reality. In fact, it would not be far off the mark to use the term magic realism of any of these stories. Miraculous things happen, and powerful powers abound. The common denominator in all folk wisdom is that it has the knack of crossing cultural boundaries. Canadians ought to welcome these beautiful newcomers.

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#### TYING LANGUAGE TOGETHER

**Bineshiinh Dibaajmowin/Bird Talk.** Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. Illus. Polly Keeshig-Tobias. Sister Vision Press, 1991. Unpag., \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-920813-89-5; **The Flower Beadwork People.** Sherry Farrell Racette. Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1991. 34 pp., cloth, paper. ISBN 0-920915-23-X, 0-920915-25-6.

Sherry Farrell Racette’s *The Flower Beadwork People* concerns a people who tied language together, literally—Cree with French, Ojibway with Scots. These

people brought their languages and cultures together, and in doing so created a new nation: the Bois Brûlés, the Métis or the Flower Beadwork People. Racette's non-fiction text offers both a rudimentary history and a cultural overview of the Métis nation, emphasizing the importance of family and community, and the integral beauty of their rich heritage. Because this book is so basic, and so clearly geared to the young child, Racette necessarily glosses over the complexities and intricacies of cultural life, giving instead a general impression of the whole; she considers dwellings, dress and family duties, occupations and relaxations. Her simplicity, however, should not be read as deficiency; her style is clear and occasionally engaging. The glossary, which she provides at the end of the book, clarifies some of the book's more challenging terms.

The text's rather unadorned prose is enlivened by Racette's illustrations, paintings rich with movement, vibrant colours and (sometimes) intricate detail, and steeped in folk and Native artistic traditions. *The Flower Beadwork People* was originally produced in 1985 as a part of the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Métis resistance of 1885; this revised, second edition contains some new artwork as well as work from the original text. Old and new illustrations speak eloquently, more eloquently in fact than Racette's prose, of the community and lifestyle which she celebrates, of the celebration inherent in that lifestyle. This conjunction of simple prose and bright, stirring illustration seems particularly apt for the earthy and vivacious community of which she writes.

Mid-way through *Bineshiinh Dibaajmowin/Bird Talk*, the narrator of Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's story recalls a relative, Mishomis, "tying language together" the last time she was "home" on the reserve. "Tying language together means interpreting or translating. I love to hear him tie up the language and untie it. He takes words from our language, makes them into smaller words and then tells what each word means in English," she explains; "kettle," for instance, really translates as "duck pail." A warm memory, recounted in simple language, it speaks both from and of the heart of this gentle book.

People who know Keeshig-Tobias as a storyteller and ardent spokesperson for the rights of First Nations peoples will expect to find here a book at once eloquent and politically-charged. They will not be disappointed, although this book is perhaps less gracefully fluid than some of her other work (a lack attributable, in part I suppose, to the youthful narrative voice). Keeshig-Tobias's story about her young daughter Polly's difficult transition from reserve- to city-life is a moving one.

The book's most obvious tying together of languages is found in its parallel texts: Ojibway and English stand side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder with the grown Polly's lovely and simple line drawings, which constitute a third, a non-verbal, language within the text. I make no bones about understanding absolutely none of the Ojibway; but my delight in seeing the language on the page

is not vicarious, and does not grow out of a sense of the “quaintness” or “exoticness” of its inclusion. The language has a striking visual presence; something not to be overlooked in a picture book, since the medium itself demands that the verbal be visual, the visual verbal. Within the triangle of languages presented, there is the translation and interpretation which Keeshig-Tobias’s narrator mentions, but there is also a displacement, a pleasant jostling for position between tongues and eyes. And as my mental tongue bumbles and flubbers over these—to me—foreign syllables, I am increasingly aware of this language, increasingly intrigued by it, though ill-prepared to enter it. That ill-preparedness is crucial, since it *begins* to reconstruct for me just how tough Polly’s entrance into the city must be, into another culture, another language.

Language tied together ties together, creates a sense of community and identity which Polly needs confirmed. The language of Polly’s schoolmates may exclude and belittle her, may challenge her identity as “Indian,” but that of her mother, of her family at home, of her people, embraces and defines her. Language both initiates and eases Polly’s pain; it is, then, the heart of this story, drawing the whole thing together.

Both Keeshig-Tobias’s and Racette’s books are situated at the juncture between language and community: Racette names and interprets a nation set apart by its linguistic and cultural uniqueness, whereas Keeshig-Tobias more cogently and pointedly explores language’s relations with identity—personal, cultural and national. Both articulate Native heritage and community in graceful, sometimes elegant, celebration; and both offer important gestures towards a literature of identity for Native children, and a literature of understanding for non-Native children.

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## ENTRE MODERNITÉ ET TRADITION

**Les Contes de la Chatte Rouge.** Elisabeth Vonarburgh. Montréal, Éditions Québec/Amérique, 1993, 255 p.

Châteaux, dragon et magiciens: voilà autant d’éléments relevant du conte féerique “médiéval” qui se retrouvent dans le dernier ouvrage d’Elisabeth Vonarburgh. Toutefois, loin de constituer un simple avatar de cette tradition narrative, le récit de Vonarburgh réinvestit un cadre plutôt familier d’une façon singulière qui en rend la lecture à la fois très intéressante et quelque peu déroutante. A mi-chemin entre le roman d’aventures et *Alice au pays des merveilles*, cet ouvrage présente un quête d’identité féminine qui hésite entre l’événementiel et le discursif, entre l’action et la discussion, de façon à bien montrer qu’il ne s’agit pas là seulement de la reprise d’une thématique