

## CHANGING TUNES

**The nightingale.** Michael Bedard. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Oxford University Press, 1991. Unpag., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540814-4; **Roses sing on new snow.** Paul Yee. Illus. Harvey Chan. Groundwood Books, 1991. Unpag., \$13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-144-4.

In *The nightingale*, Michael Bedard and Regolo Ricci team up once more to produce another successful re-telling of a Hans Christian Andersen tale. Ricci's illustrations are superb; ornate and finely wrought, they evoke the aura of dignity and myth which Bedard has written into this tale about humanity's slavish attraction to the technologically "new" and the falsely beautiful. This dignified tone is one of Bedard's most significant departures from the original, and helps ease a reader's discomfort with the racist depiction of the Chinese in Andersen's version. However, Bedard's eloquent prose and his obvious decision to lend the tale more subtlety undercuts one of the most winning and pointed features of Andersen's story: the sharply-barbed satire of upper-class arrogance and the banal adherence to fashion exhibited by all strata of society.

Gone is the Lord Chamberlain's foolish mistaking of the mooing of cows and the croaking of frogs for the nightingale's song; gone too are Andersen's delightfully absurd details about people greeting each other in the streets with "Night" and "gale," and the eleven grocers who named their decidedly unmusical children after the renowned bird. What emerges instead is a tale that invests the court, and especially the emperor, with a considerable degree of respectability. Yes, the music master is still foolishly committed to a music which can be computed, and the Lord Chamberlain does attribute the nightingale's drabness to an overwhelming awareness of its own lack of physical pizzazz by comparison with the richly-apparelled members of court. But Bedard's tendency is to throw out the more amusing and ridiculous aspects of Andersen's satire.

Such revision works towards a specific end, however—towards, in fact, the *story's* end. Bedard's alterations here are large and their implications far-reaching. While the nightingale is not caged at the end of this retelling, it might be said to be metaphorically imprisoned. By delivering up the nightingale's important final speech to the emperor, Bedard has, rather ironically, silenced the bird whose song is so crucial to the tale. For it is the emperor who has the last word, instructing the nightingale to come and "[s]ing...of joy and sorrow, and of the good and evil in the world, which are kept hidden from [him at court]"; it is the emperor who commands the nightingale to come but not to stay, in order to preserve its freedom. The change not only represents the emperor in a far more positive light than Andersen's original (*here* is a man who has learned his lesson and acts upon it with all his imperial authority) but also re-orientes the power dynamics of the whole story.

In Bedard's version of the tale, all of the bird's most important actions are

dictated by either the emperor or the serving girl, to whom Bedard gives a dramatically increased role. The girl, who disappears part way through Andersen's tale, maintains a strong directional presence in Bedard's: she coaxes the nightingale to court, frees him when the mechanical bird usurps his position, and provides the impetus for his return to the dying emperor. Her heightened presence gives the story a stronger sense of pattern and cohesion than Andersen's, but at the cost of the nightingale's own "freedom" and self-determination. These qualities, as much as its beautiful song, are what make the nightingale stand out from the slavishly trendy people in the empire (the serving girl and the poor fisherman are the only possible exceptions); Andersen's nightingale is *natural* and so beyond both imitation and control. His bird rejects the falseness of wealth for the sincerity of honestly and intensely felt emotion. Bedard's bird, however, is merely beyond imitation; it is always controlled by a person, and never given the opportunity to reject the emperor's wealth on its own. Only its song remains, and even that is not unchanged—for this nightingale lacks its precursor's wise insight into the follies of humanity.

Perhaps one could say that Bedard merely strips away Andersen's romantic posturing, that this re-telling returns the nightingale to a *more* natural, because less humanized and unselfconsciously symbolic, position. Certainly Andersen's nightingale is symbolic, and the process of figurative imposition which bestows such value is entirely implicit in his tale: the bird, through its critique of human society, seems to create its own symbolic function; of course, it is Andersen who really does the creating. The nightingale as symbol in Bedard's story is more clearly the product of human manufacture, be that manufacture at the hands of Bedard, the girl or the emperor, because all of the bird's significant actions are the result of human intervention. What one is left with, then, is the choice between types of freedom and symbol: Bedard's bird—less humanized but more humanly-directed, or Andersen's—anthropomorphic and independent. And I must admit that, while I admire Bedard's craft and the grace of his prose immensely, I do prefer my nightingales to have voices of their own.

Maylin, the heroine of Paul Yee and Harvey Chan's *Roses sing on new snow*, has a voice of her own and uses it to advantage in what has been subtitled "a delicious tale." Another "tale from gold mountain," this story continues Yee's project of giving voice to the Chinese experience in North America through the forms of traditional folktales. The occasional awkward phrase aside, Yee's text is interesting and nicely paced. The story of how Maylin gets the kudos she deserves for her delicious new dish, "Roses sing on new snow," despite her father's and two brothers' attempts to take the credit, and of how she stands up to the governor of South China to teach him and her family a necessary lesson about the importance of culinary individuality, is clearly in sympathy with feminism, even if the heroine does spend most of her time in the kitchen. Maylin is a bold, creative and hard-working woman who defines the patriarchal structures of the story's historical period to make a statement about her own

identity and abilities. Her defiance effectively changes the tune of the men in the story, liberating herself in the process.

A marvellous complement to Yee's story are the illustrations by Harvey Chan. In fact, Chan, with the help of book designer Michael Solomon, all but steals the show. The soft colouring of the illustrations creates a strong sense of the past; the pictures themselves are beautifully evocative, bringing a Chinatown of old so much to life that one can almost smell and hear it. As in all good picture-books, the illustrations here tell their own story, or tell the story in their own way. For instance, Maylin's insistence that only she can make "Roses sing on new snow" as it should be made is playfully supported by the illustrations—only she wears rose-coloured clothing. However, what is most stunning about this book is the way the pictures are located on the page. Often, though not always, the pictures are cropped and positioned to follow the lines of their subjects, to emphasize postures, attitudes, antagonisms. The technique animates the dynamic tensions of both text and illustration, and lends a forcefulness to the illustrations which counters the quietness of their colouring.

Both of these books are revisionary: Bedard revises, for better and worse, Andersen's classic tale; Yee revises North American history with new folktales that recover old stories. If Bedard and Ricci's book is more problematical than Yee's and Chan's, it is no less interesting and certainly no less accomplished.

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## PLAY BALL

**Take me out to the ball game**, Maryann Kovalski. North Winds Press, 1992. 32 pages. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-74030-X.

This book will bring particular pleasure to children who have experienced taking the subway to SkyDome to cheer the Toronto Blue Jays, but all children will enjoy its enthusiastic good spirits. Joanna and Jenny are real fans, chewing masses of bubblegum to get more baseball cards, and when Grandma takes them to a game, they enjoy the food and atmosphere with gusto. The text is mostly the lyrics of the title song—an added benefit to readers who like to sing. It is the sort of picture book you can spend some time on pointing out details to your listener, but don't try to explain the rule by which Grandma saves the game!

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