

A Quest and an Odyssey

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The Bird No One Noticed, Kenneth Radu. Illustrated by Diane Radu. Borealis Press, 1971. 13 pp. \$4.95 paper.

Khufu, The Wonder Cat, Anita Lever. Illustrated by Elizabeth and Frances Smily. Blackfish Press, 1975. 55 pp. \$3.95 paper.

The Bird No One Noticed and *Khufu, The Wonder Cat* appear to have been written for the same age group (8 to 10-year-olds). Actually, *Khufu* would appeal to almost any age; I enjoyed it enormously myself, whereas *The Bird No One Noticed* with its full page illustrations and extra large size blue type seems at first glance like a picture book for a fairly young child. However the physical format of this book is very much at odds with its content.

The Radu book is yet another re-telling of how the robin got its red breast and cannot compare with the classic version by Flora J. Cooke in which the robin sings his breast while fanning the remaining coals of fire which had been stolen from the Northlanders. Our Canadian children's literature is replete with tellings and re-tellings of Indian legends, some based on traditional stories, others not. I believe that the origins of these tales should be noted on the title page, as a courtesy to the Indian tribe from which they originate and as a guide to our children. If they come from the author's own imagination that should be noted too.

Ka-weta, a dull brown bird wishes to have beautiful red feathers like the cardinal, Ka-le-le, especially when he learns that the colour red is a sign of special favour in the eye of Manitou. From Mi-wanta, a wild red rose and the red-winged blackbird Say-ka he learns that each vibrantly coloured messenger of the Sun God has to pay a price for his glory. Ka-weta decides he is willing to pay any price to be so gloriously coloured and therefore makes a trip to Manitou's home in the Land of the Sun. His wish is granted although the cost of it is not revealed until the following spring.

Khufu, the wonder cat, unlike Ka-weta is eminently noticeable, right from the beginning. He has no need to strive for greatness; it has been thrust upon him in the form of a pair of wings which take him wherever he wants to go, plus a magical gift of tongues which enables him to communicate with all creatures. His odd appearance (when the wings are in bud) causes him to be rejected by his master and driven to seek sanctuary in the nearby woods. Unable to fend for himself, he is rescued by a Black Cat who takes Khufu home to his mistress, the Wise Woman of the Woods and protectress of all the creatures therein. Together, they teach Khufu all the lessons and skills he needs to draw upon later on in the story. At length, he flies to Egypt with his friends the birds, saving them from some evil men half way across the ocean. Upon arrival, he parts company with the birds and

embarks on a mission to rescue some cats which are being held prisoner by a tyrant in a nearby country. Through clever use of a riddle, he gains freedom for the cats, only to lose his own. All his fellow creatures, from the most lowly flea to the mighty hawk, rally round to save him.

I read both of these stories to several groups of children (about 65 in all) ranging in age from 7 to 10. They were unanimously delighted with *Khufu* and insisted I read all 55 pages in one sitting, but a few days later they fidgeted and fussed throughout the reading of the much shorter *Bird* book and commented afterwards that it was boring and confusing. One girl summed her feelings up (and mine) when she said. "In the beginning, it sounded like it was going to turn out good but didn't, the only part I liked was when he headed for the sun at the end."

In his article on *Canadian Fantasy*, (CCL No. 2) Kenneth Radu states that Canadian fantasists focus too self-consciously on content and meaning and bemoans the general lack of 'poetic overtone' and 'general inventiveness'. That he has striven for these effects is particularly evident at the beginning in his dramatic description of the red flash of the cardinal "This extra blaze of colour was like music on a quiet forest morning, so lovely and unexpected" and at the end, but the story flags in the middle where these 'overtones' become more like overwriting.

Constant repetition of the sound "Ka" in the creatures' names makes for confusion for both listener and reader. There is *Ka-weta*, *Ka-le-le*, and *Shay-ka*, already mentioned, plus *Ka-sou-le*, the bird of the golden tree and *O-ka-way* the owl, wisest creature in *Wa-man-ka*!! All the hyphenated names add to the general feeling of disjointedness.

Then too, there is a false note in the basic structure of the story which bothers me. After the wind has blown off all her petals, *Mi-wanta* tells *Ka-weta* with her dying breath that this is the price she has to pay for her red beauty. But isn't she paying a price here for her frailty rather than her beauty, for wouldn't the wind blow on and destroy all fragile flowers regardless of their colour? It would have been more consistent to have had some being, unable to resist the appeal of *Mi-wanta*'s brilliant colour, pluck her and thus bring about her death.

Furthermore, some of the concepts were difficult indeed for 8 and 9-year-olds to grasp. For example, none of the children I read to could really understand how *Shay-ka*, the red-winged blackbird and bearer of bad news was the price the cardinal had to pay for bringing good news. We are told there is a price for everything (arbitrarily imposed from on high) and also that "there is no great news without news of grief"; these ideas give a gloomy, fatalistic tone to the story which is certainly not written with the same lightness of hand that touched Radu's earlier work, the poetic and charmingly told *Legends of the Ojibee*, in Gage's *Nunny Bag*, Number Five.

One wishes this story could have been as simply handled as the illustrations, which, although little more than hastily done line drawings, are interesting and imaginative. As to the binding of this soft-covered book, it was so flimsy that the title page fell out after only two readings.

There is a saying, 'you can't judge a book by its cover', but not so in the case of Anita Lever's, *Khufu, the Wonder Cat*. The exciting cover

illustration with its swirling movement exactly depicts the dancing momentum of the story which is to follow. Throughout the book, the delightful illustrations by Elizabeth and Frances Smily are meticulously crafted, detailed and yet uncluttered and serve as a perfect accompaniment to a story which has been written and produced in the same careful manner. Children's books do not always need colour and this is proof of it, although the magenta end papers do provide a nice bright touch.

Anita Lever is a natural story teller. Funny names and riddles tumble out of her book like candy from a Christmas stocking. She catches your interest at the beginning, sustains it throughout in a smoothly written series of exciting adventures, and then closes with an ending which is entirely satisfying.

Khufu is much more, though, than a mere adventure story. It is both amusing and inspiring and should have a wide range of appeal. Our society at present is overwhelmed with violence and it is therefore especially heartening to read a book in which traditional enemies team up to defeat a petty war-monger and set free their fellow creatures. When *Khufu* is taken prisoner, it is the lowly flea who is instrumental in bringing aid. To do so, he must travel inside the mouth of a frog, but there is no real danger for all creatures work together for common good. When the band of cats arrive at the mouse-ridden kingdom of Jellibag the Jovial, restraint and mercy are shown to the little rodents who, rather than being pounced upon and destroyed on the spot, are merely chased away to plague another country.

Although it is soft-cover, the binding is sturdy. Short paragraphing and fairly large black type make it easy for a child to read. I look forward to reading more stories by Anita Lever.

In closing, I might add that *Khufu The Wonder Cat* was made in British Columbia without government funding; *The Bird No One Noticed* was published with the assistance of The Canada Council.

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