

Songs, Riddles and Rhymes

BEN JONES

Ring Around the Moon, ed. Edith Fowke. Illustrated by Judith Gwyn Brown. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 160 pp. \$7.95 cloth.

Ideally the child will grow into an awareness that the connection established with a specific place is a connection to all places. Language is a means by which such awareness exists, and this function of language is what one finds particularly articulated in popular forms of language use, in folklore, riddles, charms, omens. The study of children's literature finds its justification in such an attitude towards language, and such an attitude informs us of the kind of achievement Edith Fowke offers in her new collection of folk material, *Ring Around the Moon: 200 songs, tongue twisters, riddles and rhymes of Canadian children*.

The collection will undoubtedly be a useful book for classrooms, summer camps, and family evenings (where they still exist). The selection of material has the sound of organized activity, and the presence of the adult leader is obvious. There seems at times to be a threat that we might get to "Shine on Harvest Moon" or "Down by the Old Mill Stream". We do, in fact, get "Frère (*sic*) Jacques" and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat", tunes included. Much of the material is commonly available, and while the principles of inclusion remain vague, the selection is varied and wide. Many of the songs will have to be taught, and the riddles explained, but the spontaneity and liveliness of a talented teacher, counsellor, or parent (one hopes such talents have survived) may give the material life. The book will bring to the child no particular sense of folk tradition, but it may provide some fun. So much depends on the congenial adult presence.

As a book for a child, it does not seem to me to be adequately attractive or stimulating. Perhaps we expect too much from Edith Fowke; the merely good is disappointing. The arrangement of the material is formal. Typography and format are unvaried throughout the collection. Distinctions of tone and mood are inadequate as we move through the various modes of expression. The illustrations are not always interesting, and never arresting. Too often they merely fill in blank areas of the page, and they do not offer a sense of the integrity

of design. Compare the illustrations in *Ring Around the Moon* to those, for example, in Brian Wildsmith's *Mother Goose*. Wildsmith enlivens the page, even with simple designs, and he shapes experience. Judith Gwyn Brown has been asked to do too many illustrations; none are distinctive. The loose selection of material in the text results in a lack of continuity in the visual experience of the book. Riddles do not seem part of an intrigue; charms and omens do not become magical. The arrangement of omens and charms, usually five or six on a page, encourages skimming; what is wanted is a slowing down of the pace. For the riddles, the answer unfortunately is given abruptly as the last line. The reader gets the answer without the possibility of guessing. For some riddles, the answer will not come easily; for example, No. 64, "King Henry Has Set Me Free", which has the following explanatory note: "To release the princess, someone has to guess the riddle: that there were six birds and an egg in a horse's skull". But the game could be: "Who Read the Answer First? Too little is demanded of the imagination.

The title of the collection and the jacket illustration offer a kind of guessing game. Why is this book entitled *Ring Around the Moon*? One suspects that it has something to do with the weather-omen "A ring around the moon, / Rain is coming soon" (No. 116). But *what* does it have to do with the omen? A ring around the moon is a storm-warning, but the happy moon-face on the jacket has little to do with warnings, and the book itself does not seem to be ominous. Sally's trip around the sun does not require a ring around the moon. The inquisitive child may want a better answer. Perhaps this is a minor point, but the problem remains: some of the material does not seem to be carefully considered or integrated into a unified idea of what the book tries to achieve.

The material has some connection to Canadian folk tradition, but the claims for specific Canadian content are appropriately modest. Edith Fowke, in her brief introduction, says only that "all the items . . . have been in oral tradition in Canada", and she acknowledges that "nearly all are in common use in other parts of the English-speaking world . . ." (p. 7). This is certainly no claim that the material is uniquely Canadian. It notes, if anything, the cosmopolitan character of the material. No attempt is made to mark origins; that is, to trace a particular item to a particular locality or to show its line of descent. Many of the items have been gathered in the Toronto area, so we would expect a composite sampling of North American traditions rather than anything especially unique. The sub-title on the jacket, *200 Songs, tongue twisters, riddles and rhymes of Canadian children*, is somewhat stronger in noting the Canadian element in the collection, but some children I know wanted to know what "of Canadian children" meant.

Possessed by? Belonging to? About? We agreed that the phrase was equivocal, and should have been avoided.

An eight-page section on "Sources and References" is included, but its use is limited, and the methodology is unconvincing. The section would have been more appropriately designated "Acknowledgements". Many of the individuals cited will be unknown to most readers, and many of the "references" lead us only to other collections. Lamont Tilden is listed as a "source" for "Lavender's Blue"? Does anyone *not* know it? It is a friendly gesture, but it contributes little to the authority of the book.

The effort to provide a scholarly apparatus for the book is unsuccessful. It is compatible with the aim of offering a practical collection, and it is certainly counter to what a child wants in a book. It demonstrates the uncertainty about purpose and audience that damages the overall effect of the collection. Acknowledgements must be made, but they are not the same as sources, and they should not be confused with research. Detailed studies of the sources of Canadian folk tradition are still wanted, and methods of contemporary language study need to be developed, particularly for the language of popular culture. The study of the literature of children must respond to this need. *Ring Around the Moon* suggests how much material is available, but it also shows how much remains to be done.