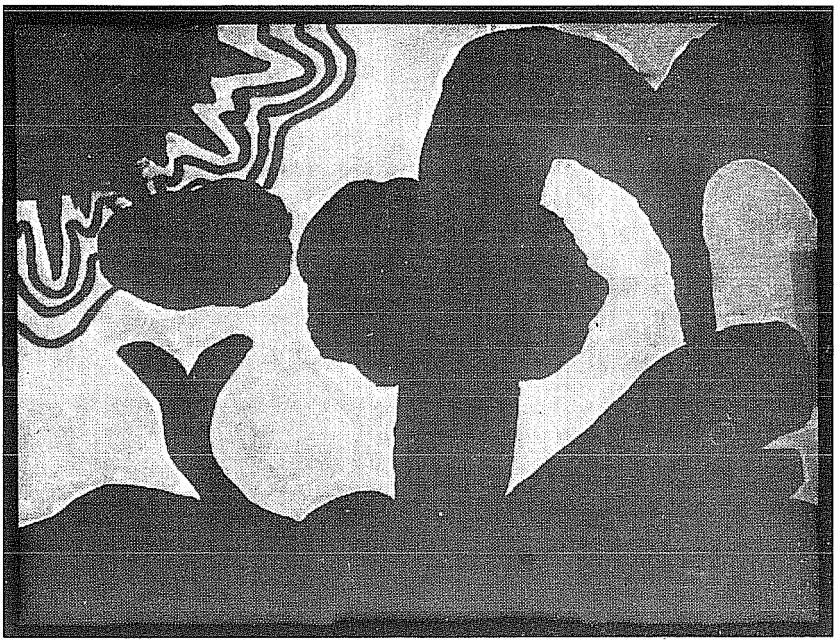
spirit of the whale!" It is a sentiment that echoes through the reading of the book and lingers long after.



Joel Catanzaro, age 11

Mary Ford is a previous contributor to CCL. *Her article on the figure of the wolf in childrens' literature appeared in issue number 7.*

A Journey into Fantasy

ROBERT H. MACDONALD

Song of the Pearl, Ruth Nichols. MacMillan of Canada, 1976. 158 pp. $7.95 hardcover.

What becomes of us when we die? Are we judged in the hereafter, are we punished or rewarded, are we given another chance? Surely we have come from somewhere; surely we are moving on? We cannot just cease to be.

Christianity gave essentially eschatological answers to these questions: after death, we awaited the Last Judgement, were then sorted into the sheep and the goats, and went our separate ways to Heaven or Hell, there either to worship the glory of God or to suffer the punishments of the damned. These Christian promises seem to have faded into little more than folk-memories as in the West we rationalize and de-mythologize our religion, yet the need is still there; we still want to know. What does become of our souls, if indeed we have them? Coming from nothing, do we return to nothing, our sins unpunished, our virtues unrewarded? To these crucial questions Ruth Nichols in her fantasy *Song of the Pearl* gives one kind of answer.

Margaret Redmond died in Toronto in the year 1900. She was seventeen years old, had suffered from asthma, and had had an unhappy adolescence. At the age of fifteen she had been raped by a favourite uncle: in a way it had been her own fault, for she had teased and led him on, and after his desertion of her she had felt to her shame not revulsion but lust. In his absence she became melancholic, and died.

On coming to consciousness, Margaret finds that she has been transported to heaven, more or less. She is alone in a beautiful landscape, she feels well, she seems at peace. She walks to a lake, and a boat transports her across to an island, where she discovers a little pavilion, simply furnished. She refreshes herself with the food and drink that are always provided; she sleeps a lot, and swims in the pleasant water of the lake. She grows more beautiful.

As time goes on, she is attacked by loneliness, and when, imagining that her punishment is eternal solitude, she begins to despair, she sees a man standing on her island by the shore of her lake. This man turns out to be Paul, a Chinese aristocrat, who quotes the Song of Solomon and is able to read her mind. He is the first of Margaret's spiritual guides. He lives by her for a while, disappears, and then returns to conduct her to his family home in some heavenly replica of feudal China.

Heaven is not always either easy or nice. Margaret, in her spiritual pilgrimage, must push on, and at times she is often lonely, frightened and tired. She has visions of her past incarnations: she was once Elizabeth, the wife of an Elizabethan sea-captain; she was Zawumatec, a girl slave of the Iroquois; and she was Tirigan, a Sumerian prince. She meets an oracle that gives her cryptic information about the Hanged Man, which she connects to the card of the Tarot Pack that she and her uncle in her past Toronto life had taken an illicit interest in. The part that her uncle played in her several lives comes slowly clear: he was Elizabeth's second husband, the sea-captain; he was Zawumatec's master. He was a dominating and selfish man, and Margaret must come to an understanding of her continuing relationship with him. Her true love, it turns out, is Paul himself.

This short novel may appeal strongly to adolescents and young women. Margaret has what the psychoanalysts would call an Electra complex: she

has a love-hate relationship with an older man, and implicit in her story is the awkward but surely common problem of half-awakened sexual desire. Her short life is described with admirable clarity and brevity, and her complicity in her own rape is indicated with delicacy. Yet here lies one of the novel's weaknesses. Margaret has a sin to expiate: she has used her sexuality, half-consciously, yet aware of its power; she has become currupt rather than corrupted; she has lusted. This is strong stuff, an interesting and potentially dramatic psychological puzzle for the reader.

To our disappointment, Ruth Nichols leaves her heroine's problems in embryo. Though we might expect Margaret's psychic pilgrimage to refer to the details of her earthly sins, we are given only abstractions; where we might have found torment, we are shown little but tears. Margaret's experiences in the non-physical world are strangely tame, and the descriptions are thin. We are given only the sketchiest information about Margaret's previous incarnations: a little dab of Elizabethan history, a dash of Iroquois, and a smattering of Sumerian for colour. These moments of history appear as remote to the reader as they must have been to the author; they do very little to stimulate the imagination. Despair and suffering are occasionally described, but without context, and the most lasting impression of the land of the dead is that of an adolescent dream, where nature is soft and beautiful, where prople are nice once they get to know you, and where you grow whole and healthy and beautiful in a way that would bring joy to the heart of Helena Rubenstein.

In spite of this the novel may have an impact if it catches the right reader at the right time. The writing is excellent, the tone romantic. The message, that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin, is idealistic. One thinks of Siddartha—the intentions are much the same—though the pilgrimage of Margaret's soul, the song of her pearl, sound less profoundly in the ear.

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