

Christmas Undelivered

CAROL CUMMINGS

The Night the City Sang, Peter Desbarats. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld. McClelland & Stewart, 1977. 48 pp. \$5.95 cloth.

The Night the City Sang, by author, journalist and broadcaster Peter Desbarats was originally published under the title *Halibut York and More*. A collection of three stories yoked together by a yuletide theme, the book presents an attractive package. It was designed and illustrated by Frank Newfeld, familiar for his illustrations in *Alligator Pie* and *Nicholas Knock and Other People*, among others. In *The Night the City Sang* there are detailed gold and black illustrations, often elegantly balanced with text. One of the visual strengths of the book is the use of repeated images, enlarged or minimized appropriately for page layout, to emphasize thematic continuity in the stories.

Written in rhymed verse, the stories are perhaps most notable for the skill with which the author has evaded the singsong rhythms which are often produced for child readers. In the stories the natural sound patterns and melodies of the spoken language occur, but with the addition of that artistic tension which poetry can lend to speech. Indeed, the possibility of a metronomic reading is virtually eliminated by the shifting of meter and rhyme pattern from one line to the next. At its best the verse is lively and intriguing in its flow; at its worst there is a kind of cleverness which strains to avoid a regularity of meter and rhyme:

“Out of the way!”
Lucretia’s cry
Echoed from space.
The carolling stopped.
Every angel’s face was turned
To watch this unidentified object
Barrel into the atmosphere
Helter-skelter in a welter
of “Wows” and “Gollies!”
And inappropriate cries,
Crash through a cloud
And disappear
From sight.
“Another satellite,” they sighed.
“Did you hear the slang?”
“American for sure.”
“It’s more than harp and halo
Can endure.”

(p. 42)

In more successful passages, the sense and substance of the lines are synthesized in the odd flow of the lines:

She thought of her mother. The house of snow.
The flame dying in the stone bowl.
The dogs howling. The sleigh flying.
Her father crying. The silver bird.
She came to the place where children lie
In sunlit caves beneath the sky.
In moonlit caves the silver children slept
And dark as the night, Halibut York wept.
(p. 8)

Here the fall of syllables delineates an image of the Eskimo child and her dislocation. In spite of the stereotypes of the snow house and silver bird, what emerges is a sense of Halibut York as an individual who has a finely-honed sense of detail. This child, spoken of so poetically, is herself poetic. Hers is a story of a marvellous Christmas wish.

If the strength of the stories is in the versing, their weakness lies in the development of tried-and-true story lines. The embellishments Desbarats fashions for the presentation of these old themes do not succeed in convincing the reader that these are modern literary participants in a continuum of universal concerns. In short, the book suggests a bandwagon attempt to appeal to the seasonal book-buyer with a set of suitably Canadian-costumed stories. In "Halibut York", a little Eskimo girl is hospitalized in Montreal at Christmas time. She wishes for a whale, and the story deals with the unprecedented journey of a whale up the St. Lawrence River. The arrival of the whale in Montreal Harbour on Christmas morning perplexes everyone but Halibut York, who just smiles. In the title story, an aged musician, made magician by his faith in music, enchants the buildings of downtown Montreal, cajoling them into a massive festive chorale. The carolling is brought to an abrupt halt when the old man is arrested for suspicious capering in the late-night streets. In his story the joyous innocent is seen to succumb to the spiritless cynicism of the urban world. In the third story, young Lucretia, a tiny devil, makes a forbidden visit to earth for Christmas. There she shares the festive occasion with a lonely old man; he wishes for the Christmases of his past and with her magic powers Lucretia makes them materialize, delighting herself with the novelty. At the close of Christmas day she leaves to return to Hell, promising as she leaves to return next year.

While the three stories have potential for being both interesting and vigorous, each falls unfortunately short of fulfilling its promise because of erratic shifts in levels of language, inexplicable changes in point of view, and indulgences in allusions which are relevant only to a local or adult audience.

The shifts in levels of language obtrude on the flow of the story lines, and interfere with the fluidity of the versing. As the aged musician invokes the buildings to song, the miracle of his accomplishment is made merely commonplace by jarring metaphor:

"In your empty rooms echoes of music sound
Remembered carols abound in your silent halls
Tonight let us quit

This patate frite century
And all of you, my children,
Sing with me!"

(p. 22)

Lucretia's "Wows" and "Gollies" are suited to the character of the impudent young runaway, but the reader is left wondering what shift in emphasis renders the urchin standing before Gabriel as "A cherub with green eyes/ Copper hair/ And a certain undeniable/ Savoir faire". (p. 39) The freckled terror who haunted Hell and teased her sisters arrives on Earth -- transformed by yet another sudden shift in view -- in full female sensuality:

There she sat, diamonded,
Naked as Eve, spitting like a cat,
And scratching the snow
From her opalescent eyes.

(p. 44)

A similar shift from one allusive framework to another occurs in "The Night the City Sang". There, amidst the wonderful mystery of the old man's faith in the power of music, a wedge of social conscience is driven:

Bonsecours Market dozed with premonitions
Of demolitions and parking lots
Rasco's Hotel, a warehouse now
(Turnips where Dickens slept)
Remembered how Christmas was kept
A hundred years ago....

(p. 22)

Or, suddenly evocative of a disenchanted everyday world:

People throughout the city were aghast.
They blamed the neighbours, hammered on walls
The police received thousands of calls.
Is it some kind of stunt?
An advertising quirk?
Has Musak gone berserk?
Is it Russia or Cuba?

(p. 28)

In the final analysis the stories are disappointing because their evolutions are hammered out before the reader's very eyes, and not rendered by authorial sleight-of-hand behind the screen of words. In "Lucretia", for instance, the imp escapes from Hell not by a natural effort of her wit and skill, but by a convenient authorial intrusion:

Just before she went to bed
This Christmas Eve, Lucretia said,
That she had left her pitchfork on the lawn.
She ran outside, and ran....

(p. 37)

In "The Night the City Sang" the musician's magical performance is brought to its narrative knees by the sudden and convenient appearance of a policeman who terminates both the frivolity and the story by arresting the old man. The reader is told that the musician's "gyrations incomprehensible" were "reprehensible". In "Halibut York" the little girl prays to "God....Santa Claus,

Jesus,/ Whichever is right..." (p. 8) for a whale. Having paid tactful due to various interpretations of the focus of Christmas, the author tells us that "God hears, and to Him it wasn't absurd..." (p. 8). God finds the whale "off Reykjavik", and inserts "into the tiny, gentle brain... a notion" (p. 10). Inspired the whale sets forth, "his tiny soul flamed with desire/ His blubber burned with divine fire..." (p. 12). Such is this holy mission that the food chain itself is suspended as the whale and his entourage of porpoises and other seabests find that "Shark and barracuda bored/ Peacefully through the rushing horde/ Neglecting their normal stalking of prey./ Electric eels refrained from shocking," (p. 13). What is distressing in these passages is the urgency of explanation; it is an insistence which divulges the presence of an adult author who has forgotten that children accept the presence of magic calmly as the daily ration of their existence. Explanation in this context becomes a kind of fastidious literary fence-riding.



In spite of the pleasing promise resident in the format and subjects of *The Night the City Sang*, the inconsistent treatment of the stories produces an unsatisfying reading experience. The startling intrusions of words and images from alien contexts, and the uncraftsmanlike wrenching of plot lines to achieve workable conclusions render the book unmagical, unmysterious, and finally out-of-step with the spirits of wonder it wants to invoke.

Carol Cummings is a teacher and freelance writer on children's literature in British Columbia.