

A Good Direction in Canadian Children's Fiction

PAMELA STEELE

Simon and the Golden Sword, Frank Newfeld. Illus. by the author. Oxford University Press, 1976. 24 pp. \$4.95 hardcover.

The Gift of the Frost Fairy, 3rd ed., Sheila Bleeks. Illus. by Kelly Clark. Cherry Publishers, 1978. 23 pp. \$5.95 paper.

The Gift of Winter, John Leach and Jean Rankin. Illus. by the authors. Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1977. 32 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Among the efforts in the past few years to give Canadian children a literature of their own, it is very pleasing to find attempts in the fields of myth, folk-tale and fairy-tale. It is even more pleasing to note that some authors, at least, know that a respect for the special kind of imagination at work in these genres does not necessarily preclude a realistic, matter-of-fact approach or a sense of humour.

The author and publishers of *Simon and the Golden Sword* cooperated to produce a good quality Canadian children's book at low cost. The book is beautifully produced, with full-colour illustrations on every page. The varied type is clear and attractive, and the paper is of excellent quality. Newfeld combines bold lines and colours with intricate detail in his pictures for an entertaining variety of effects: patchwork design, scrapbook cut-outs, comic-opera soldiers, traditional giants, an ultramodern glass mountain, and a whole range of ugly faces touched by his own brand of humour.

The text is an adaptation by Newfeld and William Toye of a story recorded in New Brunswick and now part of the collection of the Canadian Centre of Folk Culture Studies in Ottawa. Despite a front-cover declaration that this is "a Canadian fairy-tale", the story is really a medley of traditional European themes and motifs: a farmer with three sons, a king with three swords, a princess to be rescued, a giant to be defeated, a flying horse, and an assortment of small objects with magical powers.

Perhaps because it is a tale told from memory, the story has many weaknesses. The motif of the three swords, for example, is never developed, and the golden sword for which Simon must choose the right scabbard is

later inexplicably encased in a scabbard from which only Simon can remove it. The prose style and dialogue are plain, the tone somewhat flat. The illustrations, however, more than make up for what the text lacks in zest.

The Gift of the Frost Fairy is an imaginative attempt to give Canadian children a "home grown" fairy story, set in a familiar winter landscape, and introducing the themes of art, beauty, and self-sacrifice.

Froska, the frost fairy, paints the loveliest frost pictures ever seen on windows: "Hillsides of twinkling diamonds and meadows of ferns and feathery creatures and splashes of sunburst in between." The "gift" of the title is "the Gift of Life." When Froska sees, through one of the windows she paints, a father and mother weeping at the bedside of a dying child, she tries to rally the child by painting the most beautiful picture she has ever made, and when that is not enough to rouse him she makes the final sacrifice, breathing her own life into him as she herself melts into "part of her own masterpiece on the windowpane." In the morning, the frost picture sparkles in the sunlight and the boy's parents find him healed, "his face bathed in brilliant joy."

There is a faint echo here from Hans Andersen's "Little Match Girl" who derived such "joy and gladness" from the pictures she saw in the flames of her matches. A child's response to beautiful pictures, however, is the only point of resemblance in the two stories, for when Andersen's unloved waif was found in the morning sunlight "her cheeks were glowing, her lips smiling, but she had been frozen to death."

We do not want contemporary authors to treat the death of a child with the sentimentality of their nineteenth-century predecessors, but I find Bleeks' ending questionable on two counts: first, she has not avoided an oversentimental treatment of death, but merely transferred it at the last moment from the child to the fairy; second, fairies, especially good fairies, are not supposed to die. (Shout "Yes! We do believe in fairies!" loud enough, and Tinkerbell will stay alive.) If we are going to have a fairy-tale tradition in Canada, do, please, let us have properly immortal fairies!

The text of *The Gift of the Frost Fairy* is unlikely to evoke much response. The writing style is poor, a mixture of loose, chatty sentences and stilted phrases, such as these: "As they settled into their morning visit, the Queen complimented Froska on her artistry." A few small attempts at humour, as when Froska lands in a heap on the Frost Queen's bed, are not enough to offset the sugary, sentimental treatment. The illustrations are disappointing. Children reading, or listening to, the accounts of "fawns and angels of feathered lace" will find only thick blobs of icing sugar on the windows shown. It is a pity that the technical abilities of the author and artist do not match their good intentions.

The Gift of Winter is a modern weather myth: long ago, when there was no such thing as snow in the world and winter-time was no fun at all, the people of a town trudged over bleak countryside to the Ministry of Winter,

to lodge a formal complaint. Gruff old Winter refused to hear them, but when he heard the children say “Nobody likes Winter” he began to cry, and:

As it dropped, Winter’s tear burst into tiny white stars . . . sparkling soft twinkly bits . . .

“What’s this stuff?” asked Bazooley.

Despite the fact that the children melt Winter’s heart when the adults have failed, a charge of sentimentality could not possibly be brought against *The Gift of Winter*, for the treatment is light, humorous, and witty – a welcome change after *The Gift of the Frost Fairy*. Children of all ages will enjoy the cartoon-type characters: Small and Tender, two children à la Giles; Goodly and Nicely, two pleasant adults; Rotten and Malicious, two unpleasant adults, and Bazooley, a rubber-toy man.

There are, however, several “buts”, which could be combined to form one question: “But who is supposed to *read* this book?” Young people will enjoy the story of how snow started, but the satire on such facts of modern life as placard-carrying protests marchers, form-hungry city halls, and other humbugs will be beyond their comprehension, and adult readers may have to tell them the story “straight”, reserving the satire for their own enjoyment.

It is not wrong, of course, to make a book enjoyable on more than one level. The trouble in this case, however, is that the levels – especially levels of diction – are not well integrated. If the whole story had been told in the colloquial style of the piece already quoted it would have been acceptable. Instead we have lines of non-words marching across some pages: “Tromp, tromp, tromp, tromp . . .” and “Steppidy steppidy step . . .”, atrocities like “Zoweeee” exploding from characters’ mouths in comic-strip balloons, and cosy phrases like “the children slept comfy” mixing unhappily with the more sophisticated language of satire:

“We request that proper and effective methods be initiated to make winter nicer.”

.....

“How dare you challenge my authority? . . . My law is absolute. My actions are governed by . . . the infinite order of the universe.”

It would take a fairly high level of ability for an independent reader to absorb such a passage quickly and fluently enough to appreciate the fun. Unfortunately, children who have reached that level are likely to have also reached a stage where they are very prickly about “babyish” books and will reject the picture-book format and the “comfy” parts of the text.

Anyone who shares an entertaining book with a child for the sake of encouraging good reading habits and skills might well hesitate over the non-words. Conversely, it is doubtful whether those whose preferred reading is the “Zoweeee” type of comic book would respond to this pleasant little

snow myth with anything but derision.

The Gift of Winter is funny and clever, but either the authors have tried too hard to cater to all possible tastes, or they have neglected to consider what audience they would write for. A “something for everyone” recipe turns out to be a little too much for anyone.

The weaknesses of these three books are not weaknesses of their respective genres. Whether children accept or reject them, they will do so for the same reasons that they would accept or reject any stories. The authors have taken steps in a good direction; if they take further and stronger steps the children will gladly follow them into myth, folk-lore, and fairy-tale.

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Dubious Magic

MARY H. PRITCHARD

Joanie’s Magic Boots, Brenda Bellingham. Tree Frog Press, 1979. 125 pp. \$3.95 paper; \$8.95 cloth.

Brenda Bellingham’s first novel for children, *Joanie’s Magic Boots*, might have been an exploration of the imaginative relationship between fairy tale and reality or a magical story about the power of a symbolic material object to transform imaginatively the shape of the real world. Instead, it is a tale about a troubled child’s struggle to set her world to rights when magic has failed her, and as such the novel is a resounding success.

The youngest reader in the six-to-ten age range for which the novel is recommended could hardly fail to understand Joanie Taylor’s need for a little magic in her life. Ten-year-old Joanie lives with her working mother whose singular inability to fulfil the emotional needs of her child must, in