The Illustrator as Author

GILLIAN THOMAS

Leawala, a Legend of the Maid of the Mist, Lini R. Grol, Fonthill Studio, Ontario, 1971 reprinted 1978. 42 pp. $3.00 paper.

Magic Gifts, Lini R. Grol, Fonthill Studio, Ontario, 1975. 36 pp. $3.00 paper.

Tales from the Niagara Peninsula, Lini R. Grol, Fonthill Studio, Ontario, 1971. 39 pp. $3.25 paper.

The collaboration of writer and illustrator is the sometimes uneasy, sometimes harmonious, liaison which marks much of the history of children's literature. One thinks of Ernest Shepard and Kenneth Grahame, John Tenniel and Lewis Carroll. Very rarely we find combined in one person an unusual gift for illustration alongside the writer's craft. A great example of such a combination of talents in the nineteenth century was, of course, Edward Lear, and in our own time there is Maurice Sendak. Much more frequently, however, one comes across talented illustrators who require a "vehicle" for their work and decide to provide it themselves by writing their own stories or poems to fit the style and content of the pictures.

The latter has been the starting point for these three books produced by Lili Grol. A resident of Fonthill, Ontario, Grol is an accomplished exponent of illustration by free-hand scissor-cuts and has written a book on the subject. Largely because the text of the books seems to be perceived by the illustrator/author as secondary to the illustration, the quality of all three books is less than satisfactory.

Having chosen the extremely difficult task of presenting Indian lore to white children, Grol proceeds to treat this subject matter in a somewhat arbitrary fashion, mixing elements of genuine lore and fictional invention with little regard either for the integrity of the lore itself or for narrative art. For no apparent reason, she uses the term "potlatch" quite incorrectly as a synonym for any large feast. Similarly, she frequently refers to "witchdoctors," a term with connotations so pejorative that it would be likely to confuse the child reader as to the attitude being expressed. There is also occasional use of the all-too-familiar ploy of using cumbersome or inverted sentence structures to convey that the culture being presented is archaic or alien. This technique is now so much a comic stereotype that it has become unusable.

We also see here some of the common hallmarks of the beginning writer for children. One of these is the habit of verbally collaring the child reader at the end of the story with a rhetorical question. Novice writers frequently use such devices, less because they intend to patronize the reader, than because they are unsure how to conclude: "Now, do you think he did right? Do you?" ends one of Grol's stories. Child readers can tell readily enough that such questions are not genuine attempts to canvass their views, but rather are ways of setting them up to give a required response.

In the end, the inadequacy of the writing takes its toll on the illustrations themselves. Because there has been insufficient attention to Indian lore and because the substance of the narrative is incompletely realised, the cuts showing adult Indian characters tend, in some instances, to give them an immature childish look. Other cuts tend towards a sentimental style. From some of the more successful examples of Grol's art shown here, it is evident that the scissor-cutting technique can yield an effect with something of the density of woodcuts, though no illustration in these three books has the expressiveness and power of woodcut illustration at its best. Given narrative material with more skill and substance, it might well be that Grol could prove to be a gifted illustrator. At present, her attempt to develop as a writer seems to hamper her talent as an artist.

It should be mentioned here that these three books are all self-published. Unlike vanity publishing, self-publishing has an interesting and honorable history marked by such figures as Virginia and Leonard Woolf and Anais Nin. In recent years quite a number of children's books have reached Canadian bookstores by means of this route. This is sometimes because novice writers assume that they can produce a children's book while learning to become a "real" writer: a sad fallacy, since writing for children demands not only a highly developed craft but also a knowledge of a very specialized type of writing. Self-publishing is often, in part, a reaction to the difficulty of "breaking into" the field of children's writing. Few Canadian or U.S. publishers are now prepared to consider picture books by unknown author/illustrators. Discouraged by their reception in the commercial market, many aspiring children's writers find it feasible to self-publish their manuscripts. Such publication is generally effected without professional editorial assistance, knowledge of book design beyond the advice of a local printer, and even, in some cases, adequate proof-reading. Consequently these productions often have an amateurish look which is less the result of a shoestring budget than of unfortunate choices of typeface, paper and binding, and poorly balanced page design. Given the present economic conditions, it seems likely that self-publishing of this kind will represent a larger proportion of all books published in Canada and will loom particularly large in the field of children's publishing. In the past this phenomenon has been largely ignored by those concerned with the future of publishing in this country. However, if the number of commercial Canadian publishers continues to diminish, it may well be that some energy should be directed to attempting to improve the quality of books produced

by the various forms of maverick publishing.

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The Delights of Texture: Cleaver's Colourful Mixed-Media Effects

PATRICIA MORLEY

The Loon's Necklace, retold by William Toye. Pictures by Elizabeth Cleaver. Oxford University Press, 1977. 24 pp. $5.95. ISBN 0-19-540278-2.

The Fire Stealer, retold by William Toye. Pictures by Elizabeth Cleaver. Oxford University Press. 24 pp. $6.95 bds. ISBN 19-5403215.

Elizabeth Cleaver and William Toye make a great team. Toye's simple but suggestive text touches on pain, fear, humour, bravado, fantasy and joy. Cleaver's paintings remain stamped on the inner eye after one shuts the book's covers. Story and drawings are comfortable together, natural partners.

Cleaver's colours are both bold and subtle, but her textural effects are particularly remarkable. One thinks of the super-realism of contemporary Maritime painters like Pratt and Forrestall. A patch of fur draws the testing finger, irresistibly; surely a bit of fur has been pasted on, here? Birchbark is also rendered super-realistically, with fine detail.

This technique co-exists with the wet-wash effect of traditional watercolour, and with woodcut effects. In *The Loon's Necklace*, there is a large owl, and a man's face, close up, in woodcut technique. A night scene of a hut, beautifully stippled, resembles wood covered with moss or lichens, and constrasts dramatically with the flat bright washes on the human figures in the doorway. These visual techniques reinforce the moods created by the narrative.

Both stories have a youthful hero, but *The Loon's Necklace* sets both old and young in heroic roles. A young boy helps his blind father to kill a bear, but is unable to deal with the sinister malevolence of a hag who forbids him to tell his father the good news. The magical intervention of a loon (aided