by the father's will to *trust* and to *try*) restores the man's sight. The loon is rewarded by a necklace whose shells become the bird's beautiful white markings. The hag, defeated, becomes an owl, to annoy the family by screeching. Her cloak, covered with totemic markings, contrasts with the family's plain robes and adds a note of awe, even terror, to a story with a happy ending.

The Fire Stealer is the story of a young Indian boy who steals fire to aid and comfort his people. Magical elements, including the boy's ability to take what shape he chooses, will delight young readers. The book has the feeling of fire throughout, starting with its frontispiece, a fiery red-orange finely veinly with yellow. Autumn foliage reflects the fire's colours and reminds the youth of his triumph.

The Fire Stealer has been taken from the Ojibway legends of northern Ontario, in the tradition of the Great Trickster. *The Loon's Necklace*, a Tsimshian legend from the West Coast, was made into a short film released in 1950. Cleaver's rich and beautiful collages have justly earned her work many prizes.

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Attempted Flights of Fantasy

FRAN ASHDOWN

Willie Won't Fly, Jim Quixley. Illus. by Clarence Barnes. Borealis Press, 1978. 51 pp. $4.95 paper.

The Mouse Who Came to Dinner, Kenneth Radu. Illus. by Diane Radu. Borealis Press, 1978. 49 pp. $3.95 paper.

Martin's Starwars, Joan Lyngseth. Illus. by Steven Collier. Borealis Press, 1978. 69 pp. $4.95 paper.

Neophyte authors of children's fiction have a predilection for the fantasy genre. Perhaps the appeal of creating a brand-new world, whose boundaries and characters need not be as severely limited as in realistic fiction, is too attractive to resist. Unfortunately, many of these initial attempts are

insipid, saccharine, or disappointing.

In animal fantasy, anthropomorphism tends to be a particular problem. A fine line must be drawn between the natural qualities of the animal character and the superimposed human speech and thought processes. Another pitfall for inexperienced writers is characterization. Too frequently shallow stereotypes are substituted for carefully drawn figures. In some cases, the writer finds difficulty in eliciting sympathy for the protagonist because of his failure to make the character seem real.

Willie Won't Fly exemplifies some of these problems. The protagonist is a bird in name only: Willie, who has a most un-bird-like fear of flying is forced out of the nest, and his neuroses and traumas are noted at length in an extended catalogue of adventures between nest-leaving and eventual security. His encounters are entirely predictable, from rough handling by a careless bully to being stalked by his rescuer's cat. At no point in the story is it made clear why Willie is afraid of flying – which renders trivial his eventual accomplishment of flight.

The book is further marred by awkward and sometimes ungrammatical writing. Poor and repetitive sentence structure, occasional use of an incorrect tense, slangly expressions, and a reliance on exclamation marks for emphasis, all detract from the book's impact. The word "knocked" is used three times in one sentence, and it is not clear whether such lines as "he didn't have to be scared of any stupid old cat or anything" are intended to appeal to children through slangly colloquialism or to depict Willie as a lower-class bird. Rather than revealing personality through dialogue, the author resorts to lengthy descriptions of how the characters feel.

The setting is also inadequately rendered. The statement "It was a beautiful spring" follows such phrases as "birds kicking up a racket" and "oak trees started to show the fresh green of spring": hardly imaginative writing! The format with its large busy print, lines too close together, and thin paper which enables the reader to see the text on the reverse of the page, makes the book a formidable item for young children. The illustrations, inadequate in number, are awkward and unappealing, consisting of spare black outlines, with minimal shading.

Another specimen of animal fantasy is *The Mouse Who Came to Dinner*. This book, aimed at the same age group as *Willie Won't Fly*, illustrates many of the same faults. The format is almost identical (large cluttered print and thin paper) and just as unappealing. The few illustrations fail to adequately supplement the text. In fact, some are so unclear that it is difficult to readily identify the object being depicted. The mouse is depicted bare-headed although the text describes him as wearing a peacock-feathered hat.

Radu's characterization is slightly more adept than Quixley's. Beau the mouse is timid and nervous as befits his breed, the snake has a "voice as

cool and thin as an icicle", and the hen's domineering, fussy ways and her protective instincts are reminiscent of a real hen with her brood.

It is unfortunate that the story shows a lack of concern for style, since the plot is serviceable. Briefly, Beau mouse is invited to dine with his friend, Dierdre the hen. He indicates his dislike of the corn soufflé she offers, and the two decide to let a snake be the judge of their cooking skills. Danger ensues: the snake attacks Beau and a lynx later attacks Dierdre. After each of the friends has rescued the other from danger, they agree to respect each other's cooking. In phrasing, the tale suffers from pretentiousness – words like "iniquity" and "undubitably" jar, and so do awkward constructions like "what a danger our days are becoming."

Martin's Starwars is directed towards a slightly older audience than the previous two titles and, for this reason, the scarcity of illustrations presents a less important problem. However, the book's large size may deter readers who have just recently graduated from the picture book format. Again the illustrator employs a drawing technique which occasionally makes it hard to identify the subject of the picture.

The writing is ponderous even when the story presents startling, unreal events (such as space travel by means of a magic suit). Richard's adventures in space seem to have very little effect on him. He reacts with unchildlike apathy. He says he has had exciting encounters, but that excitement fails to convey itself to the reader.

The relationship between Richard and Martin, a being from outer space, is identical to that between two ordinary boys. Because Martin's extraterrestrial qualities are not emphasized, the reader tends not to "suspend disbelief" when Martin performs his parlour magic and quick transformations. The nosy neighbour is a pure stereotype. As is the case with Radu's book, the plot has possibilities but they are not realized. The concept of a space suit which carries its wearer unexpectedly into space is a good one. Martin, a being who can change shape at will, is also cleverly conceived. But most children would derive more enjoyment from the book's prototype – the original *Star Wars*, then from this over-extended and trivial tale.

Let us hope that these books do not represent a trend in current Canadian literature for children. It is understandable that budgetary restrictions may decree black and white illustrations where colour would be desirable, and paperback format rather than hardcover; it is less comprehensible that under these same restrictions mediocre writing should still be published. A greater degree of attention to the craft of writing might have enabled these three books to provide good fantasy experience for the contemporary child. Flights of fancy – whether into an imagined animal world or into the starwar spaces – are valuable means of stretching a child's consciousness.

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