Fantasy is an Olden Days Coat

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The Olden Days Coat, Margaret Laurence. Illus. by Muriel Wood. McClelland and Stewart, 1979. 40 pp. $6.95 paper.

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* is a fantasy, of a sort – the dream of a middle-aged woman, trying to cope with her own dark pools of memory and desire, and at the same time to offer stability, love and encouragement to a teen-aged daughter. Perhaps only in fantasy can an adult succeed, as Morag does, in the growth toward tolerance, then sympathy, and finally admiration for a generation so different from her own.

Now, in a moving and beautiful book for children, Margaret Laurence reaffirms her dream of sympathy between generations. A little girl grows, in *The Olden Days Coat*, toward perception of older people's needs and values. This book is fantasy of a more overt sort than *The Diviners*. The story begins when ten-year-old Sal puts on an old-fashioned Red River coat – and is whisked into a strange encounter with a child of an earlier day. The outcome of the fantasy is an enriched ability on Sal's part to understand what life was like in the days when the coat was first worn. By the end of the book, Sal finds that her Gran, in spite of having hands "gnarled like old tree branches", somehow doesn't look old-fashioned.

The tale begins on a winter afternoon, when bare branches of the maple throw shadows, and a little girl, "depressed, miserable and sad", is also shadowed by the recent death of her grandfather. Sal stands on the porch of an old house, in a row of old solid serene houses, but her mood is dark. Then the sense of her own loss leads to a small surge of awareness of her grandmother's loneliness. But she is still a child, and is shooed away by the adults – told to go and play.

And so begins the play of the book – the fantasy of an adventure entered through an old shed behind Gran's house. In the shed there is a trunk; and in the trunk there is a book; and in the book there are old, pale brown pictures: of people, of families, of olden days cars and houses. Boxes within boxes, and in their heart the magic word: "What a strange thing Time was." When Sal feels *that* strangeness, she is ready for the magic coat, which, wrapped around her, will carry her to a fold in time.

"Wait a minute. Hold on, here," Sal says to herself. But Margaret

Laurence catches her, and us, too, in the spell. We can't wait – the coat works its magic for all of us. The illustrator, Muriel Wood, helps turn the trick. The pictures have an old-fashioned mannerliness, but they are sturdy too, like Sal and her story. There stands Sal, trying on the "olden days coat".

Most grown-up Canadians will feel a sudden slip into memory: "Why, I had an outfit like that! We *all* did – navy-blue Red River coat, trimmed with scarlet flannel, belted in a long red sash knotted and fringed, with a hood to pull up over the red toque with its tassel on a long cord. There were red mitts and pullovers too – to be piled, steaming, on the school radiators on snowy days . . . " One might suppose that a "Red River coat" would have an extra-special meaning for someone like Margaret Laurence who grew up in the West, and is very much aware of the current exploitation of Red River history – rebellion and all – in Canadian prairie literature. But we *all* wore those coats. Their nostalgic hold over a Montrealer's memory, for instance, led to the appearance a few years ago of Mary Peate's warm and funny book, *The Girl in the Red River Coat*, about Depression days in Notre Dame de Grace. Yes, anyone of us middle-aged people will be charmed by a stir of remembered smell and texture and colour.

Older Canadians – someone like my eighty-nine-year old mother, for instance – may add another layer of nostalgia. "I remember a cutter like that! I remember my grandfather taking us for a ride on Christmas – wrapped in a great shaggy buffalo robe, trimmed with red – and how the bells would jingle in the harness!" What could be more effective as a device for starting a Canadian trip through time?

The fantasy unfolds: a sleigh-ride, a blue jay, a painted butterfly. Then a special problem emerges for the story-teller: how to end this trip out of modern time? How to return to the "real" world of (imaginary) Sal? But all the story details fit together in a neat little box, and Laurence pulls off one of the great story-teller's tricks: an ending that is surprising, and yet somehow just what we expected.

The book displays also another story-telling gift that Margaret Laurence always handles beautifully. The rhythm is right; the sound of a voice comes through. Rachel, Stacey, Hagar, Vanessa – each voice rang with an unforgettable idiom and an inimitable beat. Young Sal joins the group. " 'Think quickly,' Sal said to herself. 'And it better not be a lie, either'." " 'Where are you bound for?' " she asks; and " 'How come?' " And then, "Sal was so startled she nearly fell into a snowdrift." All the way through, it's the swing of speech, the swing of Canadian idiom.

But the best gift of all is not a trick, and not just a pleasure that satisfies us while we read. This little book gives important flashes of perception. First, it opens a door to the quiet days of a Canadian past, now locked in aging minds. Canadians have always been a great people for storing old clothes; "make over, make do" was a maxim of our parents and

grandparents. Literature "makes over" the past – makes it vivid and meaningful by imaginative renewal. Second, the book brings a suffusion of sympathy. Again and again, students who read *The Stone Angel* comment, "That was the first time I ever realized what it's like to be old." Younger children, too, need a book that stirs them to tenderness and admiration for older people.

A still deeper perception is offered also. Through play, children accommodate themselves to the realities of death as well as of life. In winter, a favorite Canadian game is to lie in the snow, slowly making angel wings – playing at death and resurrection perhaps. Sal, at the outset of this book, decides not to play that familiar game. But she finds an alternative way to cope with the cold facts of winter, of death, of being far from home. She puts on the warm coat of fiction, of imagined identification.

From *The Olden Days Coat*, any reader, child or adult, can gain the double gift of fantasy: momentary entry into a world outside direct and daily experience, and enriched awareness of the ordinary mortal world. Trailing clouds of imaginative glory we return refreshed in a sense of the mystery and strangeness of "real" life.

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The Twelve Dancing Princesses

CLAIRE ENGLAND

The Twelve Dancing Princesses: A Fairy Story Re-told, Janet Lunn. Illus. by Laszlo Gal. Methuen, 1979. 27 pp. $10.95 cloth.

A handful of books produced in Canada are world class. This is one, a tribute to the collaboration of author, artist, editor, and publisher. Such picture-story books may be reviewed by considering text and illustration as a unit and by comparing them with other editions of the same story.