

Considering the value of Joe Mufferaw as a legitimate Canadian folk figure, and the dearth of tales about him, Bedore's book, the only one of its kind, is an essential purchase for folklore collections. It is also especially valuable for children's libraries.

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The Fashioning of Fables

SAVITHRI DE TOURREIL

From Tale to Tale. Tibor Kovalik. Illus. by author. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions. 1979. 55 pp. \$10.95. ISBN 0-88962-096-2.

The best feature of this collection of stories is the emphasis it places on the creative process itself. It shows how different peoples have recognized that the essence of human experience is crystallized into tales that are

handed down from generation to generation. The opening story, from China, is about "The First Story-Teller"; it makes a frame for those that follow. The second, an Indian legend from Saskatchewan, is also "framed" by its narrator who makes us aware of the way a legend takes shape through the years. The supreme achievement of the story-teller, the giving to "airy nothing" a "local habitation and a name", is illustrated in the third story, "The Dog of Jean LaBadie". The collection is rounded out with "The Brave Potmaker" in which we see a legend being built up, step by step, before our very eyes.

Three of the ten stories stand out. The first, the Chinese tale, is very attractive, containing the wisdom, wit, and mellowness of an ancient civilization. A second excellent story, "The Laughing Ghosts of Old Wives' Lake", is good Canadiana, set in the prairies with herds of "shaggy, broad-shouldered buffalo", Cree and Blackfoot Indians, the big hunt, and vivid details of the old Indian way of life. As narrated by Elma Schemenauer, it has a poetic style which evokes an eerie atmosphere. As one satisfied nine-year-old put it: "It makes you sad, happy, and scared."

My third favorite, "The Wandering Jew", perhaps the most sophisticated of the stories, is also the most recent. It is by David Slabotsky, a Montrealer who has already won some literary renown. Slabotsky has reworked the ancient story of the Wandering Jew to produce a story rich in texture and possessing a haunting, luminous quality. This story is for readers of all ages. Even though a small child cannot take in all its mysteries and meanings, he will certainly feel its maturing effect. The Jew who has been seeking death through the years finally finds it. In that moment he gains an insight into life. He recognizes himself in humankind and humankind in himself. Slabotsky can convey a sense of immediacy and reality even when making mystical revelations. The miraculous and the homely rub shoulders: "He travelled until he came to the center of the old man's heart and sat down and prepared a glass of tea." Slabotsky uses repetition to suggest occult depths: "In a corner of the old man's heart he discovered a tattered bag . . . Inside the tattered bag he discovered a bird's nest . . . He looked inside the nest and discovered a bird . . . In the center of the eye he discovered an aleph." The aleph which is at the core becomes invested with mystical significance: the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is linked to the heart and to infinity; the beginning and the end are one and the same. Symbols help to make this revelation concrete. The bird flies away — infinity cannot be grasped — but it leaves behind it the sound of clapping hands. The Jew is left with the joyful dance in which mankind joins hands. The dance becomes the metaphor for the mystery, a dynamic, visible, and audible metaphor.

Of the remaining stories, "The Dog of Jean LaBadie" is the most appealing. This tale forms part of a collection of stories set in a small village in the Quebec of yesterday. But an earlier version, by Natalie Carlson, *The*

Talking Cat and Other Stories of French Canada (New York: Harper's, 1952), is superior to Kovalik's rendering. Kovalik has omitted an element crucial to the appreciation of the tale. Unlike Carlson, he does not properly introduce Jean LaBadie. LaBadie, the most popular *raconteur* of the village, has an uncanny ability to make his stories come alive for his listeners. This frame of reference not only makes the big black dog credible to the whole village but also adds flavour to the humour of the situation.

Tibor Kovalik, who edited the book, and wrote all but "The Laughing Ghost" and "The Wandering Jew", is best known as an illustrator. Since coming to Canada from Czechoslovakia in 1968, Kovalik has illustrated twenty-five books for children.

There are many good illustrations in the book. The two for "Wandering Jew" add to the atmosphere. The illustrations for "The Knight of Staufenberg", perhaps the best, show the Knight's progress from innocence to experience. In the first, the bare-headed figure on horseback against the hills and pines suggests youth, simplicity and eagerness for adventure. In the second picture (Figure 1) he is older and worldly-wise. He is at court, amidst intrigue and corruption. A stained glass window looms above the Knight and his sophisticated French bride. The picture suggests the conflict between institutionalized religion and the free pagan spirit of the woodland.



Figure 1.

The details in a good illustration should be right, however. This is not true of all the illustrations in *From Tale to Tale*. Those for "The Brave Potmaker", for example, merely repeat the stereotyped image of India. Surely in 1979 one could do better than a caparisoned elephant and a building that reminds vaguely of the Taj Mahal! In the second picture, the clothes and the type of beard and moustache sported by the potmaker suggest the suave Moslem monarchs of Moghul portraiture; but the potmaker's patron bears the Hindu title of "Rajah". The picture for "The Golden Lamb" is also misleading if not inaccurate. Both lambs are golden in the picture, whereas only *one* lamb is made golden in the story, and that *after* the flight.

However the *style* of the stories, rather than of the illustrations, raises the gravest objections to this collection being accepted among Canadian anthologies. ("Ghosts" and "Jew", written by Schemenauer and Slabotsky, are exempt from this criticism.)

It seems strange that the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council should contenance such awkward use of the English language. The writing is riddled with solecisms, errors in punctuation and faulty syntax. Here are just a few of the more glaring examples:

p. 3 "Had he lived in the prince's house, envy and jealousy *would for sure creep* into his heart."

p. 7 "he *lied* down"

p. 27 "won both *reknown* and wealth"

p. 44 "live here *with* a really blessed life"

p. 44 "hair shines *with* gold and her eyes sparkle *as* two precious stones."

p. 46 "return there again"

p. 47 "fulfill"

p. 52 "he *wouldn't* dare refuse, so he replied"

p. 54 "He jumped once, twice . . . but still he *would* not jump that high"

p. 55 "Since I left here, I got very far and had great horrible adventures"

Tibor Kovalik can claim our respect as an accomplished artist. *From Tale to Tale* is handsomely designed, and printed at Coach House Press for Mosaic Publishers of Oakville, "Publishers for Canadian Communities." One hopes that in another edition the literary style will conform to what is required of a good Canadian anthology.

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