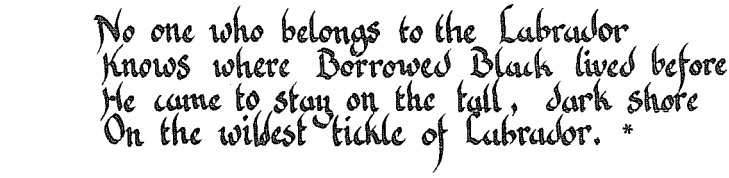
Regional Myth for Children

JEAN McKAY

Borrowed Black, Ellen Bryan Obed. Illus. by Hope Yandell. Breakwater Books Ltd., 1979. Unpaginated. $8.95 cloth. ISBN 0-919948-69-3.



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Canada's desperate need for its own myths has been so discussed that it's become cliché to even raise the subject. Suffice it to say that children can be made aware of the value of their own environment by discovering it in books. My daughter was entranced to walk into St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England, last year and find it a familiar place because of her reading of Joan Aitken's *Black Hearts in Battersea.* I'd like her to have that kind of experience here at home. (I was taken once long ago to eat the over-priced ham sandwiches in the "Green Gables" kitchen, but that was somehow not the same. The self-conscious atmosphere surrounding the event leeched away the excitement). We need books for children that are set right here at home. Not the grudging few that appear each year, but a surfeit of them, so that we can pick and choose, so that reading about ourselves becomes a natural occurrence. Regional publishers are in a good position to produce Canadian children's books, and Breakwater Books, in St. John's, Newfoundland, shows with *Borrowed Black* just how effectively this can be done.

Ellen Bryan Obed tells her story in verse with comfortable rhymes and a bumpy scansion, evoking a sense of fun similar to that in Dennis Lee's poetry for children. It's a fairy tale about the villain "Borrowed Black," who sets up housekeeping in a shack, using all the things he's "borrowed." He himself is made up of bits and pieces: wolf's eyes, seashells for ears. His heart is a borrowing wind, and it's this wind that holds him together. He also keeps some of the wind in a sack, and sends it out whenever he wants to borrow anything new. One night he borrows the moon, but it breaks into pieces so he buries them in the sea. After seventeen night-dark seasons the moon is recovered by the crew of a boat built in the back of a whale, and Borrowed Black is vanquished.

The story is fanciful, lively, exciting, but at the same time tied right down to a locale. Here's the book's dedication:

> For the children of Labrador, especially Nicky, Donald, Ross, Keith, Bobby, Richard and Wayne, who appear in this order in the first and last illustrations of this book.

Local expressions appear in the text (a "tickle," a "sculpin") and are immediately explained by the illustrations. So the book is at once attached to a specific environment, while appealing to a wide audience. None of its events could possibly have happened, but the reader's knowledge about the real coast of Labrador is enriched.

Perhaps most important, the story has a feel of the genuine. Too many stories "about Canada" or indeed "about" anything are written at one remove from the heat of creative fire, and children will immediately recognize a book with an ulterior motive. The impulse to "consumer testing" of a children's book is a curious one. If I'm reviewing an adult book, I don't read it aloud to seven friends and then pronounce "adults love it!" Yet this crops up time after time in reviews of children's literature. And it's the first thing I think of doing: find a child and read it to him. What I'm looking for, I think, is evidence of some kind of chemistry. I want the book to grab at the child's mind and engage it, absorb it, *make a difference*. Some books, even with a vigorous reading by an adult, just lie there like a piece of old gum boot, and the child's mind slides on by to something else. Children don't pretend about their responses. You can tell right away if you have a story that's dying in your mouth. And there's no danger of that happening with *Borrowed Black*.

Hope Yandell's illustrations are excellent. As I've mentioned, they support and explicate the text. (I've known a child to hurl a book because the drawn boy had different coloured hair from the written boy.) But they're not merely accessory. They have a strength and a sense of humour that invite the reader to pore over them. And they're far more than static tableaux. In some, especially the two round ones, the familiar figures are on the verge of breaking into swirling pattern. There is an artist here who is more than ready to burst into animation. This wolf and whale, for example, who appear almost incidentally, are aching to be on the move (figure 1). Indeed, the whole book would animate very well. With the catchy rhythm of the words and the lively pictures, it's almost ready to go. I can already hear the tune that would accompany the funky crew of the boat that was built in the back of a whale.

While I think both the story and illustrations are of high quality, I have a few minor criticisms that would, I suppose, fall into the category of book design. The first has to do with the hand-written script, an example of

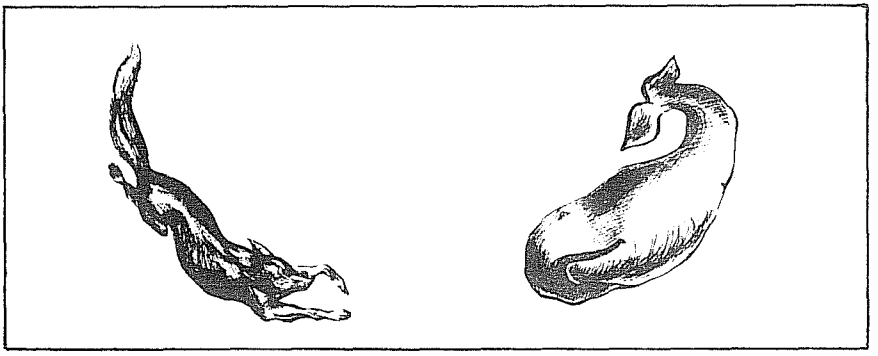

Figure 1.

which heads the review. Although it's attractive, I find it very difficult to read, especially in places where letters touch on letters in the line below. I think a child old enough to force through the underbrush of unfamiliar lettering will be too old for the story, putting the book necessarily into the read-aloud category. Secondly, the picture on the front cover, although it's one of my favourites, is at first confusing. It's one of the round ones I mentioned earlier, pushed to the limits of the representational, almost into design. Until the reader becomes familiar with the graphic idiom that Yandell is using, this is a difficult picture to decipher, and therefore perhaps not the best choice for the front cover. My last criticism has to do with the half-title page. Librarians I've spoken to about the Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data have extolled the virtues of this new system to the skies, and its use is becoming universal. Visually, however, there are no two ways about it: it looks just awful. Presses who care about the look of the books they produce, and who wish to use the CCIP system, are going to have to develop ways of downplaying it, or incorporating it into their design. Here, I think, is a particularly unhappy example of how it can clog up a page. The effect is especially cluttered because the half-title page faces the first page of the text.

These criticisms, albeit more than quibbles, are of minor importance to the book as a whole. A particularly brilliant stroke is the book's ending. A picture of Sinky Sailor (who earlier hops overboard to be the ship's anchor) finishes out the last four pages of the book. He appears smaller on each successive page until he's finally just a dot, leading us gently out of the story, out of a compelling environment where it's been good to be for awhile.

Jean McKay is a writer who lives in Coldstream, Ontario, with her husband and two children. She co-edits Brick a journal of reviews *with Stan Dragland.*