

Flights of Fantasy

RUTH HAY

Gleeb's of Wizagon, K.H. Wirsig. Illus. by Enrico Renz. Pilovale Publications, 1981. 62 pp. \$13.95 hardcover with jacket. ISBN 0-919605-00-1.

Giants From the Sky, Judy Stubbs. Borealis Press, 1980. 56 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-067-1.

Falkstode, Lesley McAllister. Illus. by Vera Fischer Kagan. Toronto: Emanation Press, 1978. 39 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-920540-04-X.

The Fantasy and Science Fiction genres are, undoubtedly, enjoying a tremendous resurgence today. Public interest in these topics is high, as evidenced by this summer's smash-hit movies E.T., Star Trek II and Conan the Barbarian. The new season's television offerings show that fantasy, in one format or another, is everyone's fare.

Those seekers after the true imaginative experience, unsatisfied by the glib parodies of the visual image, will return, as ever, to the printed word. In book stores and libraries a wide selection of fantasy fiction is available for the adult reader. But what is there of a literary quality for the younger reader?

In Canada, children of grade 5 and upwards can sample the science fiction and fantasy of authors such as Suzanne Martel, Ruth Nichols, Monica Hughes and Janet Lunn. Many of the novels by these writers offer, in addition to the highest literary standards, the extra bonus of a Canadian setting as the jumping-off point for the fantasy element. Children who have entered other worlds from subway tunnels under Montreal or antique shops in Toronto or dark northern lakes can never again look at their surroundings with the thought that nothing interesting happens here.

If the list of Canadian fantasy for children is not a long one, it is because this genre is perhaps the most difficult of all in which to excel. Not only is the creation of character, conflict and conclusion demanded of the author, but also the creation of a "secondary world" in which the reader must accept "the willing suspension of disbelief."

So delicate is the balance of belief in the fantasy world that major authors in the field, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis for example, avoided illustrations in their novels for children. Given the right stimulus, the

reader's imagination is capable of drawing such marvellous creations to his or her own satisfaction that an artist's concept is rarely as satisfying. Illustrations for fantasy narratives must, therefore, meet very exacting standards.

In *Gleeb's of Wizagon* by K.H. Wirsig we find that one-third of the book consists of full-page black ink line drawings by Enrico Renz with several others on a smaller scale interspersed within the text. This makes the illustration a major element in the overall impact of the work. Line drawings of this type can be very dramatic and effective but I find Mr. Renz's art work too often dark or confusing and when foreground material is clear it is sometimes quite ghoulish in nature. Mr. Renz has a predilection for gaping mouths!

This is not to say that the artist is entirely misrepresenting the author's intent. K.H. Wirsig's wicked witch Snagratch the Green is a thoroughly nasty character who, having taken over Wizagon's population of Gleeb's, plans to maintain her power by among other nasty ideas, employing voodoo magic and firing her fingernails at the escaping Gleeb princess Sonya Wee.

The tale is told with considerable inventiveness and skill in rhyming couplets. Sonya's quest is to find the fruit of the Taliban tree in order to dispose of the evil Snagratch. The heroine (looking rather like an egg and lacking the large nose of all her fellow Gleeb's) survives various adventures on the way with the aid of Whunuvakind who "doesn't fit with HE or SHE or THING or IT." This asexual creature is referred to in the text by invented pronouns (e.g. rruz means his) a device that impedes the flow of Wirsig's verse.

One is tempted to compare *Gleeb's of Wizagon* with the delightful *Norbert Nipkin*. While the latter has its grim aspects, such as Nipkin eating, it is enlivened by exceptional illustrations in full colour and is of a length which ensures its use by classroom teachers in grades two to four. *Gleeb's of Wizagon*, on the other hand, seems to be designed for a more mature student audience which may not appreciate either the picture book format or the verse form.

Vera Fischer Kagan has contributed nine coloured drawings to the fantasy story *Falkstode* by Lesley McAllister. The illustrations are lightly sketched and whimsical, fitting the dream theme of the story without actually contributing any new insights to the tale.

Falkstode is a ten-year-old boy who lives in a big city in the Real world but is able to imagine his way to the Land of Unreal. There he

meets Queen Cattwander and asks, "Then can you tell me please, just where I am and what I am doing here?"

Unfortunately the reader will not discover Falkstode's purpose in Un as he neither contributes to the fantasy world nor learns anything there that would be of value in his own world. He is merely a visitor in a dream landscape in which he encounters a man called Jackspur, a Gate-Keeper spider, an Aged Fox and Dubbdoo (reminiscent of Tweedledee and Tweedledum) and spends some time in Cattwander's crystal candy-dish palace. Falkstode's act of disobedience there is largely without consequences.

All of this is prettily described by the author who has a nice sense of pacing. The episodes are short enough to keep a child's attention. What is lacking in Un is integrity. If this world is to matter to the reader it must have its own laws, purposes and problems. It must continue to exist for the reader while the protagonist is absent because it has its own believable reality.

I found myself disturbed by another aspect of this story. The real world had no redeeming features. Falkstode's big city was "very empty of fun for small boys." He had no friends, no discernible relationships with his parents and no desire for his own world. Experienced fantasy writers know that the imaginary world provides an escape but that the problems of the real world must be dealt with there and not ignored.

Giants From the Sky by Judy Stubbs has no illustrations other than a cover drawing. As the setting of the story is medieval with intervention from extra-terrestrials it is undoubtedly best left to the imagination.

Two neighbouring kingdoms, Morgonia and Serlonka, are bitter enemies because of jealousy and misunderstanding. Duvon, the rightful heir to both Kingdoms, must end the strife by revealing the true facts to the people about Uri, the alien giant, about the death of Duvon's step-father, King Dotan Madden, about the courageous part played by Condor, about the real purpose of Erin, Uri's amnesiac niece, and about his own true parentage. No mean task is this for one young lad with only fifty-six pages to accomplish all!

The tale begins with great drama when Duvon, living in Morgonia as a fugitive suspected of killing his father, is racing back to his castle through a thunderstorm. His horse rears when a strange youth dressed in cloth of gold and silver stumbles into its path.

The pace moves on swiftly from this opening incident as Duvon finds out that the stranger, Erin, does not know where she came from but can communicate with him by "mind messages." These telepathic thoughts are a frequently-used device in the story, serving as a means of permitting one character to relive the past experiences of another. Eventually these experiences are communicated to the populace by instantaneous broadcast. Very persuasive and time-saving!

As the story begins in the middle by chronological reckoning, these flashback techniques are used to fill the background details. The problem arises when the author overuses the device as different characters add their part of the story out of sequence. Read in one sitting, this short novel is difficult to follow (there are several more characters that I have not mentioned). Read in a number of sessions, as is common with children, the effect of the dramatic action and mystery might well be lost in the confusion. Judy Stubbs does have talent and will, I hope, write more.

Delving into the fantasy worlds of these three authors has been an absorbing exercise for me. It is reassuring to know that Canadian writers are now venturing into this most difficult field. Perhaps some day we will be fortunate enough to discover a Canadian author who can create new fantasy realms based on our own mythology as Patricia Wrightson has done so memorably for Australian children in *The Ice is Coming* and *The Dark Bright Water*.

Ruth Hay has been a Teacher-Librarian in London schools for eleven years. She teaches Children's Literature to Elementary Teacher-Librarian candidates at summer school for the University of Western Ontario.