Jackoo's secret letter and other stories of Africa, Nettie Berg. Illus. Kathy Penner. The Christian Press, 1980. 48 pp. $4.98 paper. No ISBN; ***Snowshoe rabbit and wild rose legends or how the snowshoe rabbit got its white winter coat and how the wild rose got its thorns,*** retold by Nancy Cleaver and Rosemary Knight. Illus. Alan Daniel. Highway Book Shop, 1978. 29 pp. paper. ISBN 0-88954-162-0; ***Has anybody seen my umbrella?,*** Max Ferguson. Illus. Jane Kurisu. Scholastic-TAB, 1982. 23 pp. $2.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71087-7; ***Old tales for new readers: Aesop fables,*** retold by Mary Johnson. Clarity, 1981. 51 pp. $1.50 paper. No ISBN; ***A Grimm's fairytale: the fisherman and his wife,*** retold by Jenni Lunn. Illus. author. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1982. 46 pp. $11.95 cloth. ISBN 0-07-54851-14-1; ***Mollie Whuppie and the giant,*** retold by Robin Muller. North Winds Press, 1982. 44 pp. $9.95 cloth, $3.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71170-9, 0-590-71106-7; ***Only the best,*** Meguido Zola. Illus. Valerie Littlewood. Julia MacRae Books, 1981. 32 pp. $12.50 cloth. U.K. ISBN 0-86203-047-1.

Retelling old tales for modern audiences has been a sizeable industry since children's literature was invented and is clearly a major field for illustrators as well. This *pot pourri* of (mainly) picture books is a grand opportunity for a reader to examine just how modern authors and illustrators use the many traditions that are now available to Canadians — the Native North American, the familiar European, and the more exotic — to instruct as well as delight.

Recent folktale criticism insists, rightly I think, that many of the tales we have hitherto regarded solely as entertainment carry social messages where cannot be disregarded. In short, they instruct their readers even though the readers may be unaware of the instruction. For example, the feminists have argued (at least since *The feminine mystique*) that fairy tales teach us we should get married and live happily every after; this suggestion has launched an attack on sexism in children's literature. Other social concerns have also led us to broaden our scope from a one-time concentration on European tales to a recognition of the folklore traditions of Native North and South American, Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. The result is a new set of messages of which we are more or less critical according to their currency in our society and their blatancy.

Of these seven books, three make no bones about their intention to instruct their readers. Mary Johnson's *Old tales for new readers* is a refreshingly faithful retelling of a handful of Aesop's Fables intended for use in training adults as well as children, both Native and immigrant, to read English. The book is simple enough, a no-nonsense paperback, printed from a typewritten manuscript and devoid of illustration. Each story is accompanied by a puzzle in which the student fills in blanks with words that can be transferred into a crossword puz-

zle. In short, the book concentrates on its intention, teaching reading and the development of vocabulary by using stories that are familiar in many cultures.

Clearly, this book is the product of a philosophy that insists on the primacy of words, both as an object of learning and as a source of interest. And it succeeds. One can see why Aesop has long been a training ground for readers; these stories, happily unembellished, provide both humour and food for thought about the human condition — a fair return for learning to read.

Nancy Cleaver and Rosemary Knight's retelling of *Snowshoe rabbit and wild rose legends or how the snowshoe rabbit got its white winter coat and how the wild rose got its thorns* is a different matter. These two Algonquin Indian legends are delightful aetiological myths of Nanabozho's provision of protection for the wild rose and the snowshoe rabbit, both in danger or extermination. Like Aesop's fables, the stories are both humourous and thought-provokng. The book is very pleasantly illustrated with Alan Daniel's pencil sketches (though it is not clear why one sketch of the wild rose is crammed into a narrow margin when a judicious bit of type-setting, for which there is clearly enough space, would have made the opening much more attractive). Although the stories are told in a fairly sophisticated vocabulary, the large size of the type suggests that they are intended for a much less accomplished reader.

In fact, it is difficult to decide just what audience the authors had in mind. The introduction addresses very briefly the question of how the tales came to be and concludes that they arise from the Indian sense of ecology. A discussion of the natural history of the snowshoe rabbit follows, and a summary of the history of the choice of the wild rose as the floral emblem of Alberta, and a sketchy description of its natural history and its use by Indians. The legend of the snowshoe rabbit is followed by a documented note on its importance to both the ecology and the economy of the Canadian North. The legend of the wild rose is followed by a note that primarily summarizes the material from the introduction. There's a lot of information here, but just what the reader is expected to do with it is not at all clear.

What is most astonishing, however, is that nowhere in any of the commentary is Nanabozho so much as mentioned. Nor, for that matter, are the Algonquians (all Indians being lumped together when they are mentioned at all). The entire focus of the commentary is to draw the reader's attention away from the story as story and from its geographical and cultural context. The result is a serious disappointment and a disservice to both the stories and young readers.

Equally didactic, but in quite a different vein, is Nettie Berg's *Jackoo's secret letter and other stories of Africa,* a collection of Christian parables, African style, gathered during the author's service as a missionary in Laire. By and large, the stories are an interesting combination of African culture and biblical interpretation, though Kathy Penner's watercolour illustrations add a North American flavour.

These stories of Christian coversion will doubtless suit an appropriate audience. They are unusual — and more than usually interesting — because of their exotic setting and the way the African storytellers apply Christian principles and biblical quotation to local experience. Only one part of the book — one cannot call it a story — fails, and that is the title piece, a contrived letter from the missionary author's parrot. This sermon on kindness compares unfavourable with the parables themselves.

The remaining books are less openly didactic, but they too have their messages. Max Ferguson's *Has anybody seen my umbrella?* is a parody of *Cinderella,* only this time the prince is lazy and hates school. Having quit after Grade 1, he is unable to read very well and so, after Cinderella has fled the ball, leaving behind a glass slipper with her name on it, the prince roams the country looking for his beautiful "Umbrella." Finally, of course, he is rescued from his mistake by Cinderella's fairy godmother, who sends the two lovers off to marry and spend their honeymoon in Grade 2.

This has all the flavour of a story written for a real child who has had trouble reading something and/or hates school. And so it too has a moral, but the story is so full of nonsense and anachronism that it cannot help being amusing, especially to the young reader who knows *Cinderella.* This is a sophisticated little book that alters totally the reader's orientation to fairy tale, allowing him or her to feel superior to the main characters. To begin with, Jane Kurisu's illustrations make all the characters unattractive. Both the prince and Cinderella are homely, and the fairy godmother looks downright sly. She is not all-powerful either. When Cinderella clumsily steps on her wand and breaks it in two, she is able to produce only a red bicycle to convey Cinderella to the ball.

Perhaps one of the problems of the book is that it not only plays the fairy-tale world against real life, but that it also portrays the grown-up prince and Cinderella as children. Parents and teachers who like the idea of a story that encourages children to see advantages in going to school may be a bit uncomfortable with a book that combines marriage with Grade 2.

One of the recurring problems in all these books is the portrayal of adults. In the fairy-tale tradition adults are sometimes powerful, sometimes powerless, sometimes stupid, but always adult. Their children are very often, too, on the brink of adulthood, and the stories deal with their discovery of themselves as adults, ready to act independently and to marry, often after freeing themselves from some form of adult oppression. Such is the case, for example, in Robin Muller's *Mollie Whuppie and the giant.* Mollie and her sisters are abandoned by parents who cannot feed them and are captured by a giant who eats children. Mollie engineers an escape and the three arrive at the castle of a king; the king commissions Mollie to disarm the giant of his magic sword, his purse of gold, and his ring of invisibility. As a reward, Mollie's sisters may marry the knights of their choice and Mollie may — and does — choose the crown prince. All of this is, of course, as it should be in the world of fairy tales. The story

is delightful and the book beautifully printed and illustrated.

At the same time, however, the illustrations are a bit disturbing. Mollie is a singularly modern-looking child, despite her old-fashioned dress. The people of the court, on the other hand, are stereotypes of fairy-tale illustration, and it's difficult to imagine Mollie's becoming one of them, especially because she looks at most about ten years old. And she still looks ten in the wedding picture at the end. Here, however, her wit and cunning are gone and she looks more a child than ever. It is hard to imagine what more dedicated feminist critics will make of such a strong heroine who out performs all the males in the story and then collapses into a stereotype.

Adult readers may find the illustrations amusing from another angle. In some of the illustrations, the giant and his family look like caricatures of modern politicians (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Mollie Whuppie is a beautiful book, and, despite the questions raised here, would make a handsome and worthwhile addition to any child's library.

Meguido Zola's *Only the best* elicits a mixed reaction. It is a modern folktale about a father who goes to great lengths to obtain for his "new-born, first-born and only child" the best gift, only to discover that the best gift is "love's first kiss." His search is carried out in the face of advice from his friends, and his Rabbi, all of whom advise him to give of himself. Nevertheless, he sets out on a frivolous community-wide quest that is based on faulty logic. For example, when the toymaker tells him that the top he is looking at is "as bright as new clothing on a festival morning" he replies that "in that case new clothing must be better than a top." And so he goes to a tailor who shows him a cloak that is "as warm as Sabbath bread" and so to a baker, a shepherd, a jeweller, an apothecary, and finally to a fowler, who tells him that the dove of peace he wishes to buy is "as precious a gift as love's first kiss."

The story, of course, is amusing because it is delightfully repetitive and cumulative and Valerie Littlewood's illustrations are, for the most part, interesting. It is also an unusual story because of the father's desire to celebrate the birth of a daughter. But what of the father? It is bad enough to think that he can't see that the best gift he can give a child is love, but one can live with the idea that some men have to learn that lesson. It's harder to accept a man

who assumes that if something is as good as something else it must be better. This is a misunderstanding of language and logic that will be clear to any child who has mastered basic language, and it might well confuse one who has not. In any case, a remarkably unflattering view of fathers spoils an otherwise delightful story.

As we can see, the notion of sexism in children's literature has brought us to some rather dubious solutions in the realm of traditional folk and fairy tales. In fact, it's refreshing in Jenni Lunn's retelling of Grimm's *The fisherman and his wife* to find no attempt to ameliorate the stereotype of the greedy, shrewish woman. This is the familiar tale of the henpecked fisherman who catches a magic fish that grants his wishes — and more particularly those of his greedy wife — until it becomes fed up with her and takes everything away, granting instead contentment to the wife as a gift to the fisherman.

The story is retold with a modern and maritime Canadian flavour. The fish's first gift to the fisherman, for example, is the repair of his old, rusty truck. His wife, who is "wifey-wifey, love of m'lifey" to her face and "scourge of m'lifey" behind her back, screams curses such as "Yer liver for bait and yer tongue for trap flaps" as she makes her demands.

First, she wants plumbing, and the fisherman comes home to a house full of plumbing "doing all the things that plumbing does best. . . leaking, seeping, dripping, sweating." Then it's a maid for her four-bathroom house, then a full household staff, an appropriate position for her husband, and garden parties every day. The final straw comes with her unforgiveable desire to impose her priorities on the universe.

In this story, despite its rather grotesque illustrations, modern life and traditional tale come together without ambiguity and with the humour and the thoughtfulness of the original intact.

These books, with their wide range of approaches to traditional material, reveal the many ways in which old tales can be made relevant to new audiences — and the pitfalls therein.

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