

## FROM NEWFOUNDLAND'S PAST

*The summer the whales sang*, Gloria Montero. James Lorimer, 1985. 165 pp. \$12.95, \$5.95 cloth paper. ISBN 0-88862-904-4, 0-88862903-6; *Folktales from Western Newfoundland*, told by Angela Kerfont. Collected by Marie-Annick Desplanques. Illus. Bernard Desplanques. Publications de l'Universite de Rouen, 1985. 30 pp. \$10.27 paper. ISBN 2-902618-60-3.

The setting for *The summer the whales sang* is Red Bay, Labrador, where in recent years archaeologists have been engaged in the exciting re-discovery of a Basque whaling enterprise of the sixteenth century. The possibility, therefore, of vicariously encountering these early people or learning about them through modern archaeology loomed large in my expectation. Indeed, the blurb promised that "once they're in Red Bay [Vivi Aguirre and her mother] and Vivi starts to discover more about whales and Basques who hunted them back in the 1600s, things start to change." My expectation, however, was only moderately rewarded and the blurb in retrospect was slightly misleading.

We do, of course, get some snatches of school-text information. As Vivi says: "We had never learned anything about the Basques at school, but according to old insurance policies and legal documents in Spain, hundreds of Basque ships had come to Newfoundland and Labrador in the 1500s. All those old papers, added to the wreck they were excavating in the bay and the whaling station over on the island, were proof positive. In the sixteenth century, before electricity and a lot of modern inventions, whale oil was terribly important to Europe, and the Basques were the finest whalers in the whole world." Both I and my 13-year-old daughter (who read it without prompting) were dissatisfied with that. We were indeed expecting the whales "to sing" and they never did.

As a novel about a girl turning thirteen, however, *The summer the whales sang* is much more satisfactory. Caught in that "scary" space between childhood and adulthood, Vivi Aguirre speaks for a multitude of other teenagers. Yet, true to reality, her problems are uniquely her own, and only she can solve them. Her growing pains are aggravated by the separation of her father and mother, having of necessity to "tag along" with her mother on her filmmaking expedition, and being forced to make new friends in a seemingly unfriendly environment. And, though the people she meets are artistically flat and stereo-typical, her own fears and hopes are vividly portrayed. The first-person point of view is, in fact, Gloria Montero's strongest asset as a juvenile novelist. If she had succeeded as well in strengthening the action, speeding up the pace (nothing really happens until Chapter 13), and giving believable personalities to the secondary characters, this novel would have been excellent. It remains, however, a

story worth recommending, and James Lorimer is to be again commended for promoting Canadian juvenile fiction. He will eventually find a masterpiece.

The second book being reviewed, though obliquely intended for young readers (according to a brief footnote on page 2), can be recommended only to the student of Newfoundland folklore. It is, in spite of its title, too specialized, too untypical and too idiosyncratic to be of much interest to children or young adults. *Folktales from Western Newfoundland* is, in fact, a collection of eight stories recounted by eighty-year-old Mrs. Angela Kerfont of Cape St. George, stories which are a mixture of classic motifs and Newfoundland tall-tales told in a dialect derived from the early French. How closely that dialect really represents Mrs. Kerfont's actual voice is a mystery, for the editor states at one point that "only a few alterations have been made to the original" spoken version but at another suggests that the "transcription of the tales as they appear in this collection is the result of lengthy editing"; an "actual rewriting" was required. Such equivocation is frustrating, and the book is not a very impressive production, proving unsatisfactory for both a scholarly and a popular audience.

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## LE MYSTÈRE DE L'ÎLE AU CHÊNE

**La main de Robin Squires**, Joan Clark. Traduit par Claude Aubry. Illus. André Dussault, William Taylor et Mary Coerepy. Montréal, Pierre Tisseyre, 1984. 179 pp. 8,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89051-158-8.

Cette histoire mystérieuse basée sur des faits véridiques constitue sans nul doute un récit passionnant pour les lecteurs assoiffés d'aventures, comme le sont en général les jeunes.

La qualité essentielle du livre réside dans le fait que l'auteur a réussi à contrôler le flot du suspense de manière à le renforcer chaque fois à la fin d'un chapitre. Cette technique pousse le lecteur à vouloir en savoir davantage. Dans l'ensemble le texte est très motivant.

L'auteur dévoile aux jeunes lecteurs quelques aspects négatifs du genre humain en posant les caractères de certains personnages; il nous semble toutefois qu'à certains moments la cruauté soit poussée à l'extrême. S'il est vrai qu'au temps des pirates et de l'esclavage bien des hommes étaient