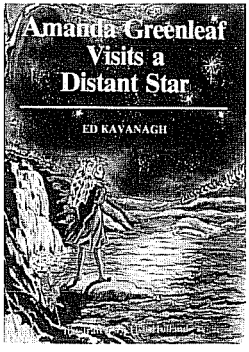

The Emperor's panda, David Day. Illus. Eric Beddows. McClelland and Stewart, 1986. 111 pp. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 07710-2357-4; **Amanda Greenleaf visits a distant star**, Ed Kavanagh. Illus. Tish Holland. Moonstone Press, 1986. 54 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-920259-11-1.

In *Tree and leaf* J.R.R. Tolkien describes "the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story" from which all fairy story and fantasy writers draw inspiration and sustenance, and to which each contributes "new bits, dainty and undainty." Tolkien also traces a seminal relationship between fantasy and language — the adjective, says Tolkien, is the real magic of Faerie; it is what gives us the "enchanter's power" to create alternate worlds. And indeed the best of children's fantasy literature is, at heart, about the great mystery and adventure of language, the spell of words and story. In fantasy literature the language creates anew the familiar grammar of story.

The Emperor's panda and *Amanda Greenleaf visits a distant star* both borrow extensively from the fantasy tradition. Each is built upon what Tolkien calls the bare "bones" of story, the heroic journey or quest, and each incorporates the stock figures of fairy tale, myth, and fantasy: the princess, the wizard, the mermaid, the wise old man, the nymph. And yet, in spite of these similarities, *The Emperor's panda* succeeds splendidly in convincing us of the vitality of its created world while *Amanda Greenleaf visits a distant star* does not; the success of one and the failure of the other is a success and failure almost purely in terms of language.

Unfortunately, *Amanda Greenleaf visits a distant star* never fulfills the promise of its beautifully evocative and quite musical title. The language is often flat ("all the water in the pool turned the most exquisite colour green" — *what* colour green? where are the enchanter's nouns and adjectives?), and Kavanagh crowds his fantasy with too many minor characters and too many issues that remain unresolved and unexplained at the end of the book. The title character, the "guardian" of a waterfall on an unidentified world, feels compelled to journey to "the Blue Star" a troubled and violent world. What Amanda Greenleaf discovers on the Blue Star, the gift that she wants to take back to her own world, is music, and she buys music lessons with locks of her golden hair. However, it is never made explicit enough to the younger reader, to whom this book seems to be addressed, that the Blue Star is Earth, and the suggestion that music is born out of

pain is troubling. Furthermore, since Amanda's world is a happy and pleasant one, and one that is gifted with the natural music of waterfalls, it is not clear why it needs the music of the unhappy Blue Star. Tish Holland's black and white illustrations are too heavy to bring this story of a water nymph's search to life.

In *The Emperor's panda*, however, David Day luxuriates in words heaped on the pages like jewels. The novel glitters with catalogues of things both ordinary and fantastic. Walking through the marketplace of the Imperial City, for example, the young hero passes

> vegetable and fruit markets, clothing markets, rug bazaars and markets selling translucent porcelain, bright tiles and glazed pots. Then there were the workshops of the iron mongers, leather workers and glass blowers, and after these the shops of the craftsmen who worked in silver and gold, and still more shops where men bartered for crystals and gems.

This is a language that never condescends to the child reader. The mysterious sound and cadence of "translucent porcelain" are as important as its meaning; words *are* mysterious and magical. The fantastic creatures — the "Minotaur, half bull and half man...the nine-headed serpent, the Hydra...the two-headed, sixlegged Blue Tiger of Annam" — exist in language and are a gift of language.

The Emperor's panda is a fantasy, an adventure story, a bestiary, and an explanatory myth. It is the story of a young boy, Kung, who must journey to the Imperial City to rescue his uncle, and ultimately the world, from the machinations of three dragon-hunting wizards. Kung's guide on this journey is the first Panda, the demi-god Lord Beishung, a clownish wisdom figure who embodies in his form and his actions the Yin-Yang principle of balance. The balance that Kung learns is both spiritual and environmental (a concern that Day has also addressed in his grown-up bestiary of the extinct, *The Doomsday Book of Animals*).

The black and white pencil drawings of Eric Beddows (formerly known as Ken Nutt, the illustrator of *Zoom at sea* and *Zoom away*) have a beautiful, otherworldly sheen that perfectly captures the tension in *The Emperor's panda* between the fantastic and the ordinary, the jewelled and the prosaic.

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