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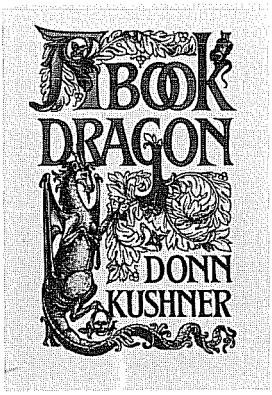
"GUARD YOUR TREASURE": DONN KUSHNER'S FICTION FOR OLDER CHILDREN



A book dragon, Donn Kushner. Illus. Nancy Jackson. Macmillan, 1987. 208 pp. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7715-9915-8.

"Guard your treasure." Or could we say, "Defend your values"? This maxim, the motto of dragons from ancient times, is one of many moral lessons that children (and adults) will imbibe painlessly along with great dollops of fun, excitement and fantasy in Donn Kushner's *A Book Dragon.*

In this, his third book for older children, Kushner hits his stride and establishes what may prove to be the trademark of his beautifully crafted longish fictions: an inspired mix of imagination, history, and ethical values. *Values*: does the word make us uneasy? Twentieth-century critics have managed to turn the concept of didacticism into a pejorative. Perhaps it is time to restore it to its rightful place. All great novelists are didactic, but not *simply* didactic: technique is all. Witness the work of Dickens, Tolstoi, and our own Margaret Laurence. Kushner's work, like that of the masters, teaches children to value love, freedom, family ties, and integrity. To these universals we can add *books*, the particular treasure featured in his third novella.

Something of Kushner's own attitude to writing seems to be implied in a speech made by the golden bird in his first novella, *The Violin-Maker's gift* (1980), set in the French Pyrenees just after the Napoleonic Wars. The prophetic bird tells its benefactor: "Poetry and parables are all very well when you're a captive and have to hide your meaning or when you're feeling very elated. . . . But for the ordinary business of life, give me direct prose." Kushner's prose is indeed direct, and strong, but not without its poetic side. Witness part of the description of the magical bird: "The golden bars on its wings had spread, and their colours were so intense that the wings seemed to be encased in a living network of metal. . . . The crest of golden feathers on his head had grown to a comb that shone like wheat in

the autumn sun."

As a young dragon of some fifty years, Nonesuch discovers that his size depends on his food intake. He suspects that the great heat to which he had been exposed in following his grandmother far down the tunnel has worked a change in his tissues. He is now unique among his kind. There are (he decides) advantages to being small: the air tastes better, colours look brighter, he can think more quickly. He therefore embarks on the adventure of growing smaller. Kushner plays with size much as Swift does, in *Gulliver's travels*. The resulting conceits are full of fun and wit.

After a leisurely start, the story moves into high gear when Nonesuch discovers the Abbey of Oddfields, with a Scriptorium where Brother Theophilus is illuminating a Book of Hours. Such books often show a detailed picture of life in their time. Kushner's knowledge of ordinary life in medieval times finds whimsical ways to express itself. Nancy Jackson's beautiful woodcuts and illustrated capital letters (in the manner of an illuminated manuscript) also add to the medieval flavour.

The monk and the tiny dragon become friends. Soon there is a dragon, or part of one, on every page of the precious manuscript: "He would paint a wing with its individual scalloping just emerging from behind the figure; a head peeping out of the bushes; or a tail flying away. . . . Only their colors varied. Some were red, some gold, several green, one deep-black with red eyes."

Traditionally, dragons are guardian spirits. By now, Nonesuch has found his own treasure to guard: the book whose loose pages are kept in a sturdy oaken box. He sleeps on it at night. The precious book is stolen, then lost. Two hundred and fifty years pass, during which time Nonesuch lives on insects. This diet has the double advantage of keeping the pages safe and himself small. By 1666, a hole in the box permits him to go in and out. He learns to read from a rat who has listened to an old man teaching children.

Lodged in the cellar, the box survives the Great Fire of London. It is used for a time as a block for a flask in a private laboratory, then bought at auction by a North American bookseller who shrewdly suspects the treasure inside. Intriguing lore concerning off-beat areas of history is used effectively.

Nonesuch, and the reader, now find themselves on the eastern coast of North America in the late twentieth century. The unnamed city could be

Halifax. Here he discovers his grandmother, sprightly and happy in flame. Her opinion of humans has never been high, and has not improved with the passage of five centuries: "They're of little account, really," she advises Nonesuch. Our hero, who had found a friend in Brother Theophilus, defends humans in a curious debate. Humans are often kind to one another ("So are rabbits"); "they work together" ("Usually for no good purpose"); they make beautiful things such as cathedrals ("If you like that sort of thing"). His final defence comes down to the point that humans make books, and that this particular book is the most beautiful thing in the world.

Thus far, the novella has been part romantic quest, part SF and fantasy — solidly grounded in daily life, as good fantasy always is. Once the action has been brought back to our own time and place, however, it becomes a thriller, with a satisfying villain and some very likeable humans, the keepers of the book.

The Gottlieb family name means "lover of God," as does "Theophilus." They sell used and antique books in a store called "Distant Voyages." Nonesuch realizes that old Mr. Gottlieb guards the book as jealously as he. Many of the books tell of intrepid journeys or quests. Nonesuch is addicted to reading bits, as his time permits. The story of Scott of the Antarctic increases his admiration for humans:

> He came to Scott's words: "We are weak, writing is difficult,but for my part I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best till the last. . . ." No, Nonesuch thought, carrying on a silent conversation with his grandmother, this was the way in which a dragon might speak. These humans seemed worth saving after all, even if one of them had not written his special Book of Hours.

Trouble looms. A wealthy developer decides that the bookstore and its adjacent properties are occupying the perfect site for his new hotel complex. After the owners have refused to sell, they become the target of mysterious threats and attacks. The pace quickens, the plot thickens, and the villainous developer — you guessed it — is eventually killed by Nonesuch, who has gone on an eating binge in order to grow back to a size suited to his role as Avenger. Greed meets its comeuppance. The man who prides himself on being an agent of change, who loves power for its own sake ("It was better to be one of those who called the tune, not one of those who danced") and who studies Machiavelli's *The Prince* is consumed by a dragon whose reality he denies.

Suspense is handled well in all three of Kushner's fictions. In *The Violin-*

Maker's gift, he makes us care about the safety and well-being of the precious bird, which is twice rescued by the violin-maker. In *Uncle Jacob's ghost story* (1984), curiosity is whetted by the descriptions of the boy's Great-Uncle Jacob, who is variously described (long before he enters the action) as the family disgrace, a completely impractical person, and an idealist searching for his own kind of truth.

Kushner himself plays the violin, and has poured his love of music into his story of the golden bird and the rare violins which speak with a human voice. He is Professor of Microbiology at the University of Ottawa, and has slipped some of his knowledge in this area into Nonesuch's experience in *A Book Dragon*. His first three novellas are destined to become classics, to instruct and delight "children" of all ages who respond to beauty, fantasy, fun, and more than a little wisdom.

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LA PETITE FILLE CAMÉLÉON

Les déguisements d'Amélie, Christine L'Heureux. Illus. Mireille Levert. La courte échelle, 1986. 24 pp. 5,95$ broché. ISBN 2-89021-059-6.

Dès la première page, le thème de ce livre d'images pour enfants nous est annoncé. Amélie, jeune héroïne, est un vrai "caméléon"; elle aime se costumer et "faire semblant d'être quelqu'un d'autre." Derrière la mise en scène d'une suite de déguisements joyeusement ludiques se cache pourtant un message plus sérieux; l'auteur veut montrer aux jeunes enfants la complexité du caractère humain.

> Amélie adore se déguiser(. . .). Juste pour le plaisir de découvrir les différentes facettes de sa personnalité.

Ce plaisir, l'héroïne le communiquera aisément à ses petits lecteurs car le thème est traité d'une façon simple, charmante et sans pesanteur didactique.

D'abord, le personnage principal est une enfant comme les autres, peut-être un peu plus espiègle et facétieuse, mais sans aucune méchanceté. Elle nous charme dès la couverture du livre — et ceci grâce aux dons artistiques de Mireille Levert. Nous y voyons une petite fille d'environ quatre ans, qui, perchée sur un panier à linge, s'admire dans la glace de la salle de bains. Elle prend la pose, "noyée" dans le pantalon de son père, bien sûr,