

MYTH, MASK, AND REALITY

Wild man of the woods, Joan Clark. Viking Kestrel (Penguin Books Canada Ltd.), 1985. 171 pp. \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 0-67080015-5; **The moons of Madeleine**, Joan Clark. Viking Kestrel (Penguin Books of Canada Ltd.), 1987. 221 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-81284-6.



Joan Clark's two recent novels for pre-teens should be read as companion pieces. Unfortunately, the colourful dust jackets, like the contents they enclose, will divide readers along gender lines. Stephen running from a fright of masks on *Wild man of the woods* will appeal to boys and some girls while Madeleine in nightgown, moon mask in hand, on *The moons of Madeleine* will appeal only to girls. The stories are self-contained, and the truths the protagonists discover are profoundly different; but each complements the other.

As the novels begin, two cousins are setting out on exchange visits: Stephen Gibson is on his way from Calgary to Inverary in the Rockies to spend a month with his aunt and uncle and cousin Louie; at the same time Madeleine Barrow, Louie's sister, is on the bus to Calgary to spend her month with Stephen's mother and his sister Selena (Selena's academic father is touring in Greece). For both cousins, the month will bring experience, testing, a symbolic death, and a rebirth into a new stage of maturity.

In *Wild man of the woods*, two themes, one realistic, one mythic, come together in an inevitable and violent climax. Louie, eleven, and Stephen, twelve, are tormented by a pair of local bullies, and the pattern of getting even swiftly escalates with chilling intensity, a microcosm of the aggressions that lead to war. In the parallel development, Stephen is introduced to the forest of masks and to Old Angus, the Indian mask-maker, whose past experience has taught him the dangers of deadly hate. When Stephen puts on the cannibal mask of the Wild Man of the Woods, all the repressed rage of his sadistic fantasies is released by the power of the mask and, losing his own identity, he perceives Louie and the bullies, without distinction, as his enemies. Because all the elements of the story have been believably linked to human motivation and behaviour, the final effect is not one of fantasy but of psychological inevitability and Stephen emerges from the experience with a disturbing recognition of his personal guilt: "Was the truth that meanness wasn't just in the faces of other people but in your own as well, where you couldn't see it?"

In *The moons of Madeleine* the conflicts are likewise both internal and external. Mad, almost thirteen, is eager for the reunion with Selena, fourteen, her best friend of three years ago. But the girl who meets her is a stranger in black with strawberry-coloured hair and wildly exaggerated make-up. Mad's resentment of the change in her cousin is deepened by her own hesitancy about moving from childhood into womanhood. Once again the story follows two patterns of development. The realistic pattern traces Mad's alternating conflicts and truces with Selena, her concern over the illness of her grandmother, and her stranger's experiences in the city and at the Stampede. The mythic pattern offers a dream escape into a fantasy world of moon maidens and Greek goddesses, where an archetypal underground journey leads to the cave of First Woman, "womb of the universe." Here Madeleine accepts her place as a woman in the continuity of life, accepts the humanness of life, and in her affirmation somehow secures the healing of her grandmother.

The shapes of the two books are similar yet one is universal, the other gender specific. *Wild man of the woods* gives penetrating expression to the primitive aggressive instincts in us all that, unchecked, lead to war, destruction and death. *The moons of Madeleine* attempts a similar expression for the continuity and affirmation of life nurtured by successive generations of women. But in *Wild man of the woods* all the elements — Stephen's psychology, the setting (Inverary is "on an edge, a place where civilization and wilderness meet"), and the natural links to Indian culture come together in a coherent, convincing whole. Although the content of Madeleine's fantasy is prepared in imagery from the opening sentence and logically related to the alienation of her waking experiences, it fails to mesh inevitably with the realistic narrative. Mad's soaring sense of freedom and release within the anonymity of a clown costume in the Stampede parade is ultimately more convincing than her initiation into the continuity of life in the cave of First Woman. Perhaps it is the uneasy mix of myths, or the leaden feet of the Greek goddesses pressed to walk Canadian soil that renders the theme a lesson rather than a revelation. However, it is the specific application of that theme to girls that raises the question of why these two novels were intentionally linked.

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AMITIÉ ET DOUCEUR CHROMATIQUE

Les vacances de Monsieur Gaston. Tibo (Gilles Thibault). Montréal, Leméac, 1987. 23 pp. 6,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-76099857-6.