

## WHALESINGER, POWERFUL, PROVOCATIVE

**Whalesinger.** Welwyn Wilton Katz. Greenwood, 1990. 212 pp., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-113-4.

Katz has been a controversial writer from the start. Her first novel, *Witchery Hill*, created problems for the author because of its depiction of Satanism. In *False face* it was the use of the Iroquois False Face masks that caused trouble. In *Whalesinger* Katz has done it again, this time with sex. Apparently, there has been an outcry regarding the sex scene in the novel. However, what the outcry is about is rather obscure. Is it the scene itself? That seems unlikely, because Katz describes nothing more than a kiss, a rather intense kiss, but only a kiss. The rest of the scene is left entirely to the imagination of the reader. Is it because there is sex in a novel written for mid- to late- adolescents? There are a lot of books with much more explicit sex in them on the market for this age group, and most of them are far less tasteful in their presentation of the act. Therefore, the problem is difficult to pinpoint, possibly because there is no real problem here at all.

Despite the controversies, Katz has always been a very good writer. Her skills have developed over the years, so that each novel has been better than the last. Indeed, *Whalesinger* breaks through onto a new, higher plane. First, the characterization is superb. Both Marty and Nick, with all their fears, resentments, pain, and desires are clearly portrayed. Nick is bright but embittered and has vowed never to let himself care about another human being because it hurts too much, and Marty is unsure and learning-disabled, lacking support and love in her life through no choice of her own. Both develop consistently and convincingly throughout the novel. Nick faces and finally comes to terms with his hatred for the man he believes killed his idolized older brother, realizing that his hatred is more destructive for him than it is for his enemy. Marty, intuitive but inarticulate, develops a much stronger sense of self-worth, realizing that she has strengths and gifts of her own, a realization particularly augmented by her beautiful and deep relationship with the gray whale mother that has summered off the Californian coast, where the two young people and a group of academics are involved in a research project. Both Marty and Nick develop through love, love of each other as well as Marty's love of the whale, which heals them, opening them both to the possibility of a true, fulfilling relationship together.

Marty's growing relationship with whales, and her ability to communicate with the mother is finely and movingly portrayed. her deep need for affirmation and the mother whale's deep loneliness reach out to the other, creating a link between human and cetacean which is profound. Katz actually presents part of some perceptions of this relationship and the world through the whale's mind, an audacious step for any fiction writer. However, this technique works,

partly because Katz has managed to make the whale's perceptions and ways of thinking alien enough that the animal does not become anthropomorphized, and partly because of the very human-seeming feelings of the whale – feelings of loneliness, isolation, concern for her calf, grief, love. Somehow the alienness of the perceptions and the humanness of the motions combine to create a powerful unity that become the whale, and could be nothing else.

The plot is also engaging. As Agatha Christie's continued popularity proves, we never grow out of our love of mysteries and adventure, no matter how mature we become. Katz uses a mystery format in this novel, centering the action of the plot on both a suspected murder and an illegal search for sunken treasure. Katz leaves the reader guessing about the murder until the last chapter of the novel. Thus the author is presenting three quite different lines of action in this novel. She is following the personal and interpersonal development of the two young people. Then Katz presents the plot concerning the whale, summered off shore, with her racial memory of another summer off this same shore, centuries before, and sees the past of that far-off time repeating itself in the present. Finally, there is the double mystery about Richard's death and the sunken treasure.

Katz's control over her material in this novel is masterly. The plot is continually fascinating. This novel should be too complex to work well in its 212 pages, yet it works extremely well, because of the author's skill in being succinct and yet penetrating in what she does present. The theme of the importance of emotional openness and love to heal many of the hurts even young people have already sustained informs this novel on every level. Tied in with this theme is the idea of trust, the need for vulnerability, and respect of the other, the damaging effects of hatred and bitterness, the need for forgiveness. And woven throughout all is the Song of the whale, tying places and times together in a unity that transcends all the individual elements of the novel, making it a spiritual *tour de force* as well. This is one novel not to be missed.

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## LOVING TIES WITH GROWING THINGS

**The pumpkin blanket.** Deborah Turney Zagwyn. Illus. author. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1990. Unpag., \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88902-741-2; **Maxine's tree.** Diane Leger-Haskell. Illus. Dar Churcher. Orca, 1990. Unpag., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-920501-38-9.