

le Moyen-Orient. Deux personnages secondaires, un archéologue juif et un archiviste musulman, ont une importance capitale pour le héros. La solution au problème présenté dans le roman demande une explication qui comprend les traditions judéo-chrétienne et musulmane. Dans la solution, interviennent l'histoire de la création du monde tirée du Zohar et l'histoire biblique de la fondation de la ville de Jérusalem par Salomon et David; enfin, on implique même les Templiers.

Le roman est profondément moral sans prêcher ni parler au lecteur en enfant. Ce roman, qui sera lu par des garçons plutôt que par des filles, touche aussi à une autre question importante pour les adolescents: il s'agit des relations entre les garçons et les filles. Dan Rixes est bel et bien le héros du récit mais, au cours d'une conversation à la fin du roman, l'entrée éventuelle de Nathalie dans l'aventure au même titre que Dan se présente:

... dans ces deux mots, elle avait mis de l'espoir, du rêve et un désir fou de vivre des expériences aussi étonnantes que celles de Dan. "Ça risque bien de t'arriver si tu continues à fréquenter un type comme moi. Même sans ça, d'ailleurs."

Ce roman, marqué au sceau de l'aventure, plaira aux adolescents tout en leur fournissant une base pour l'acquisition des connaissances historiques et culturelles.

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A JEWISH FOLKTALE RETOLD

Something from nothing. Phoebe Gilman. North Winds, 1992. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-73802-X.

In choosing to retell a Jewish folktale whose subject is the genesis of a story, Phoebe Gilman has hit upon a peculiarly Jewish theme. It is the Word, after all, that defines the Jewish people, whose remarkable survival over the millennia can be largely attributed to its devotion to its sacred texts.

In fact, the subject of this cumulative tale, the metamorphosis of Joseph's baby blanket from something to nothing to a story, can be viewed as a metaphor for Jewish history—transmitted from parent to child, undergoing successive transformations, and surviving as a magnificent epic.

Something from nothing is a simple tale:

When Joseph was a baby, his
grandfather made him a wonderful
blanket ... to keep him warm and
cozy and to chase away bad dreams.
But as Joseph grew older, the
wonderful blanket grew older too.

As the blanket gradually wears out, Joseph's mother complains: "Joseph, look at your blanket. It's frazzled, it's worn, it's unsightly, it's torn. It is time to throw it out." But, Joseph assures her, "Grandpa can fix it." And this he does, finding at each turn "just enough material to make" a wonderful blanket, a wonderful jacket, a wonderful vest, a wonderful tie, a wonderful handkerchief, and finally a wonderful button to hold up Joseph's suspenders. This, inevitably, is lost, to the boy's intense grief, until he realizes that he has been left with "just enough material to make ... a wonderful story!"

The narrative voice is not particularly Jewish. We have Grandpa, not "Zaydie," school, not "cheder," Friday night, not "shabbes." Despite their colour, these Yiddishisms might have stymied many readers; the text as it stands has universal appeal, while Gilman's magnificent recreation of Eastern European *shtetl* life in her pictures preserves its uniquely Jewish flavour.

Through cross-sections of Joseph's house, we see Grandma rolling dough behind the blanket dividing her bedroom-kitchen from Grandpa's "tailor shop" downstairs, while Father works upstairs at his cobbler's bench in a cramped bedroom. Juxtaposed with these interior views are the streetscapes, with a succession of parading villagers—a knife-sharpener, a bagel vendor, a boy chasing a flock of geese, a hurdy-gurdy man with a talking parrot (none other than Oliver from Gilman's *Grandma and the pirates!*).

As in Medieval art (a period Gilman celebrated in *The balloon tree*) much of the story is in the pictures. Reading the inch-high, wood-framed borders at the bottom of most pages, we follow the parallel story of a mouse family beneath the floorboards. Bit by bit, the fabric scraps Grandpa discards become mouse blankets, jackets, dresses, curtains, bedding, a carpet, even a miniature Sabbath tablecloth. When Joseph reads his "wonderful story" to his classmates at the end, his mouse counterpart perches on Joseph's button to read his story aloud.

Perhaps because *Something from nothing* is a tribute to a vanished world, its paintings mark a departure from earlier Gilman works. Despite the figures' exaggerated facial expressions and silent movie gestures, this is not Gilman's familiar cartoon-like style. As the Artist's Note tells us, following "a coloured imprimatura (a thin layer of reddish ochre paint wiped on with a rag) the paintings were built up in alternating layers of egg tempera and oil glaze." The result is a heavily brushed texture and numerous sensitive and individualized portraits. The expressive faces of many of the figures, like the market women, were drawn from period photos, including Roman Vishniac's pre-Holocaust studies of Polish Jews.

Because of the attention Gilman lavishes on her paintings, it is easy to overlook the careful crafting of her texts. Yet she has a fine ear for cadence. The visual rhythm—a page of three horizontal planes followed by the verticals of the street scenes and the large wood-framed squares on every second two-page spread—parallels the cumulative tale's recurring refrains:

'Hmm,' he said as his scissors went
snip, snip, snip and his needle flew in
and out and in and out, 'There's just
enough material here to make ...'

* * *

But as Joseph grew older, his
wonderful jacket [vest, tie, etc.]
grew older too.

Gilman originally heard this as an oral tale about Joseph the Tailor. It was her genius to transform it into the story of a little boy, thus enlarging its scope to a three-generational family and, symbolically, to a people. It is impossible to look at the faces of Joseph's family at the Sabbath table—Grandmother's arms encircling the candles for the blessing, Joseph's mother cradling the baby in her arms, Grandfather tenderly embracing Joseph, Father's face radiant with Sabbath peace—without being reminded that this world was wiped out barely fifty years ago.

Perhaps the title Gilman gave her story refers less to Joseph's blanket than to the Jewish people who, with a spiritual, rather than a material, focus, have survived through the millennia as "something from nothing, a wonderful story."

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PRAIRIE PASTICHE

Coyote winter. Jacqueline White. Illus. author. Lester Publishing Ltd., 1991. Unpag., \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-14-0; **A prairie alphabet.** Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet. Illus. Yvette Moore. Tundra Books, 1992. Unpag., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-292-1.



In the book *Coyote winter* the author-illustrator re-tells the story of a mid-winter experience on a Hutterite colony in northern Alberta, one which involves the colony teacher, her Hutterite students and a coyote. Notwithstanding occasional luxurious phrasing, the storyteller's voice conveys the pristine beauty of this adventure. This story, written at the request of the author's dying teacher-sister, is an animal story with classic potential.