NEW-FOUND LAND FOR FICTION

The Dream Carvers. Joan Clark. Viking (Penguin), 1995. 224 pages, $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-85858-7.

In the startling narrative prologue to Joan Clark's *The Dream Carvers*, an unidentified narrator describes the aftermath of his (or her) kidnapping by men painted ochre red, hair and all, who transported him slung on a pole, like dead game, and then, loosed, in a red boat. Where and when could such things be? The answers constitute a sortie into historical territory barely charted in mainstream Canadian literature.

The setting is the northern tip of Newfoundland in the year 1015 A.D. The kidnappers are proto-Beothuks. Their captive is Thrand, a fourteen-year-old who has accompanied his father from Greenland on the recorded timber-seeking expedition led by Freydis, daughter of Eric the Red, and her husband, Thorvard. Thrand, soon re-named Wobee by the Indians, has been taken to replace the young Beothuk whom he chased down and Thorvard killed.

In the imaginative story Clark constructs on a quasi-historical foundation, she portrays an aboriginal family group, the Osweet, as they pursue game offshore and inland, conduct their rituals, tell stories, attend an annual meeting with northern and southern cousins for trade and inter-marriage, and struggle to "civilise" their adoptee — a distastefully white-skinned, blue-eyed barbarian, in their eyes. Simultaneously, she recounts Thrand/Wobee's gradual adaptation to the ways and perspectives of his new family, punctuated by his night-time dreams of home and daylight plottings of escape. The only unrealistic element is an Indian girl's preternatural ability to penetrate his mental life. The device is slightly jarring, although it conforms to the importance given dreams in ancient Inuit myths, facilitates communication between characters, and illuminates the protagonist's evolving psyche.

On the whole, Clark uses and invents from her source material with skill and tact. This reader has only three reservations about the result. One is the pervasive flatness of characterization. The Beothuk are generally idealised. According to the old sagas and latterday commentaries, they were indeed gentle, kindly people. But these fictional representatives match all too well the wise, conservationist, undifferentiated North American aboriginals of countless children's books. The protagonist has one potential enemy among the Osweet, but his hostility peters out. Consequently — another weakness — the middle of the book, between the hero's early escape attempt and his late encounter with much more savage people, lacks threat.

And finally, history buffs may want to know more than Clark tells them about the novel's historical bedrock. But if they are driven to an outside source, like Farley Mowat's splendid *Westviking*, this last may be a good fault.

Frances Frazer *is a retired professor of English with a particular interest in children's literature. She wrote the chapter on children's literature in the* Literary History of Canada, Vol.4.