



in a blizzard, she must struggle to overcome the dangerous and unstable river ice.

The full-page black-and-white illustrations depict the blizzard images wonderfully. In other scenes, they add to the atmosphere of the story's setting. The story is well-written, but has a slower pace than many of today's children's stories. All the elements in *Courage in the Storm* including the texture of the pages, contribute to giving it the look, sound, and feel of long-ago.

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WHOSE STORY IS IT?

Belle's Journey. Marilyn Reynolds. Illus. Stephen McCallum. Orca, 1993. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920501-90-7. **La Diabliesse and the Baby.** Richardo Keens-Douglas. Illus. Marie Lafrance. Annick Press, 1994. 32 pp. \$15.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-550370993-3, 1-550370992-5. **A Handful of Seeds.** Monica Hughes. Illus. Luis Garay. Lester Publishing/UNICEF, 1993. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-27-2. **Hansel and Gretel.** Retold and illus. Ian Wallace. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1994. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-212-2. **The Last Quest of Gilgamesh.** Retold and illus. Ludmila Zeman. Tundra Books, 1995. 24 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-328-6. **Noguchi the Samurai.** Burt Konzak. Illus. Johnny Wales. Lester Publishing, 1994. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-89555-54-X.

Concerns about story unite these six picture books for younger readers. Four of the books — *La Diabliesse and the Baby*, *Noguchi the Samurai*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh* — are retellings of tales deeply rooted in tradition. One other, *Belle's Journey*, derives from the teller's own tradition as it pertains to her mother's childhood in Saskatchewan. *A Handful of Seeds* was purposefully invented to offer "a message of hope on behalf of the thirty million

children worldwide who live on the streets of their cities.”

Implied or revealed, unconscious or overt, issues pertaining to story directed the writers and artists in their use of traditional tales and are a matter of no small consequence in evaluating the works produced. For one thing, folktales call for particular handling because while technically not the registered property of any individual, they are effectively not without ownership since they are, or once were, the communal property of particular peoples and reside within known and shared traditions. Folktales, then, raise specific concerns: matters of appropriation of voice, for instance, and cultural veracity, for another. Retellings are a defining characteristic of traditional tales and a common occurrence as the narratives pass through time and space. Yet the retold tales do not belong to the tellers (who therefore are not truly authors) so much as the tellers do to the tales (like vehicles to their drivers). Retellers are obliged to the traditions from which they take their tales as well as those to which they belong or in which they present their versions. Such debts are too seldom adequately and respectfully acknowledged.

People legitimately can claim ownership of traditional tales as active bearers (tellers) or passive bearers (audiences). When oral stories are written down and take on a new life circulating in print, people who access the stories as literature likewise come to own many. Such tales that withstand the test of time and speak over space and through history resonate with an aspect of the tradition from which the narratives come or into which they have been received.

Retellers may operate with an agenda that involves revivifying or maintaining the traditional narrative — a matter of considerable import to Zeman and Keens-Douglas. Their works benefit markedly from the reteller’s dedication to contextualizing the narrations both pictorially (Zeman’s elaborate and painstaking reconstructions of Ancient Mesopotamia being especially noteworthy) and textually (Keens-Douglas’s cadence and pace being particularly effective in this regard). Yet the situating of these outstanding renderings of oral tales within the tradition of presentation raises some substantive concerns about both books.

Zeman claims to have been obsessed with the epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest written story in the world, since her childhood when she encountered the tale orally told by her father, Czech filmmaker Karel Zeman. It obviously became a matter of great significance for her, inspiring her to produce the most lavishly illustrated version extant of the epic as a trilogy of picture books, of which *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh* is, fittingly, the last volume, though a full-length animated film is in preparation. To undertake this epic enterprise, Ludmila Zeman obtained assistance from Assyro-Babylonian



experts internationally and explored artifactual and documentary sources, piecing together the fragmentary records into arresting illustrations that incorporate the known ethnographic details to produce the fullest visual interpretation yet of Ancient Mesopotamian civilization. Their very existence, let alone their extraordinary calibre, merits the awards for illustrations the first two books have already received and the Governor General's medal accorded this third. Zeman's contact with experts reflects and reinforces her appreciation of the source tradition of the tale, indicated by her dedication of this book to "all the archaeologists who resurrected the beautiful but almost forgotten ancient epic." But she herself has forgotten the literary tradition that embraced the great work, except for some brief closing remarks about recurring motifs (the Flood, hell, lions) and heroic virtues as related to this first hero of Western literature and his monomythic story. What is missing here is just how Zeman's telling relates to that literary tradition. Which version(s) has she used or rejected and why? What are the literary sources? A fuller explication of her treatment of the story would reveal what ought to be known by all readers: that this is not *The* epic of Gilgamesh, but a version of that arresting story, told many times, many ways over very many years in many places.

Keens-Douglas has provided readers a particular access to his narrative by conflating time, so that the story commences in "The country house where my grandmother lived..." on "One dark, dark night [when] it was raining..." and moves into a mystic realm where "That noise ... is enough to wake the dead." Ultimately, one discovers that the baby La Diabliesse attempts to steal in the story is the narrator himself — an old trick of oral tellers to draw their listeners in so as to lend veracity to the tale, especially one of magic and mystery such as here. Consequently, the prefatory note claiming that "characters like La Diabliesse resemble archetypes common to the cultures of all humanity" simply serves to confuse the reader who is told further that "Today's children are, of course aware that there are no hooved creatures such as La Diabliesse or Pied Pipers ..." Why, then, encourage the child to believe? Why even tell the tale? No doubt Keens-Douglas is responding somewhat to contemporary agendas of child concern dictating that young people should not be frightened or misled. But what emerges from his note is an implied diminution of his Caribbean folk heritage as well as of earlier culture worldwide — hardly what this fine teller's notable success in working out of his heritage tradition would suggest he intended. What was needed here was a clearer statement to the child, rather than a general caveat seemingly directed at adults (judging from the reference to human archetypes). Children would appreciate a fuller note contextualizing this particular frightening figure within her specific tradition (why does a woman who is a form of the devil and steals babies have particular resonance for Caribbean culture?) and within the familiar yet international tradition of frightening figures. Keens-Douglas obviously considered this tale important (good/engaging/appealing) enough to be told; it ought then be credited with its tradition (meaning/purpose/significance). Otherwise, children really are being misled through mixed

messages and limited information when they ought to develop greater appreciation through more fully understanding this delightful rendering of a classic tale.

The Konzak/Wales volume likewise would be greatly enhanced through expansion within the bound contents of the brief dustjacket comments about the tale (“for centuries, stories like *Noguchi the Samurai* have helped students of *Karate-do* understand the ancient and dignified martial art”) and the teller (who teaches courses in Zen Buddhism, ethics and philosophy as well as operating the Toronto Academy of Karate where he uses Zen

stories such as this one to complement students’ training). The reteller had sufficient concern with this tale to consider its publication of significance “to anyone who is interested in Karate or has ever had to ward off a bully” (which encompasses a large proportion of contemporary Canadian youngsters and many of their caregivers, for that matter). This story of the age-old conquest of brute strength through wit and wisdom could only have gained in significance had it been contextualized — in the Zen tradition of its derivation, as well as the international oral narrative tradition, replete with parallels. Explicit discussion of applications in martial arts instruction would have rendered the implicit use by any child more accessible, thereby achieving the stated goals of the work, unrealized despite the appropriately spare text and the complementary illustrations, rich as they are in cultural data as well as emotion.

Ian Wallace’s version of *Hansel and Gretel* is like *La Diabliesse and the Baby* in falling short of its potential through omission — here a specific disregard for a key theme in the tradition of this tale. Groundwood’s new Fairy Tale series, co-launched by this work and Marie-Louise Gay’s *The Three Little Pigs*, is intended to allow key Canadian illustrators to bring a unique perspective to classics of their choosing. Such a distinguished illustrator as Wallace is an obvious choice for the task, but he has not revealed his own choices in this process. Retellings are, as indicated above, essential to tradition, but those that live resonate with the tradition, either directly or (occasionally) in reverse, sometimes with great success as in Goldman’s *The Princess Bride* or Munsch’s *The Paper Bag Princess*. Key to the established tradition of the Hansel and Gretel tale is the victory of the children, the triumph of the child heroes. The insistence on the dust jacket and in promotion material that this is a “dark and disturbing tale [which] seems more relevant than ever today” suggests that Mr. Wallace envisions this tale more appropriately rendered for modern Canadian children as a cautionary tale of child abuse and abandonment by uncaring, selfish adults. Certainly his illustrations of an Atlantic coastal setting are very dark, offering little relief even in that ultimate childhood fantasy, “the house of sweets” (a somewhat strange usage in a contem-





porary Canadian context). Visually, there is no triumph, no apotheosis for the child, just pervading doom. This telling, then, ultimately instills fear rather than offering consolation (the essence of the true fairy tale according to Tolkien). To cope with the realities of contemporary existence, one might argue along the lines of C.S. Lewis that a child would be better and more humanely armed with human

possibilities true to tradition — cleverness, patience and perseverance, and above all, bravery and its triumphant reward.

Monica Hughes' story, published in collaboration with UNICEF, cannot help but leave children perplexed. On her own after her grandmother's death, a young girl ends up living in the *barrio* of a nearby city. Through applying her grandmother's teaching, she survives by growing a garden which is destroyed, only to be rebuilt by the community of youngsters. Here is the child triumphant, but is UNICEF meaning to suggest that homeless children can, even should, survive this way? Sharon, Lois and Bram lend their imprimatur to the notion that "children of the world must be guarded and nurtured," yet it's Concepcion herself who does the guarding and nurturing here, and there's no UNICEF box for more fortunate children elsewhere to access in order to help out. The creators of this work obviously felt that a story was the best way to carry a message. Unfortunately, this particular medium does not resonate with meaning as might another tale, perhaps one re-worked from tradition.

The most resolved of all these tales is at first glance the simplest. Yet, *Belle's Journey* is probably the most deeply felt by the teller and the closest to, and most fully cognizant of, the traditions involved. Here is a story of the steadfast devotion of animal to the child entrusted to its care and the heroic struggle of the beast to fulfil that trust in the face of whatever should arise. This is a positive vision of life, an uplifting tale which reaffirms traditional values and faith in one's true friends. Belle, an old and bony mare, brings Molly from her music lesson eight miles across the prairie through a blizzard to her home, safe. Her reward is a gentle, loving rubdown and the security of never being replaced by a flashy new pony "for the rest of her days." Marilyn Reynolds' easy but profoundly moving



telling is reinforced by Stephen MacCallum's muted illustrations that reflect the mood of old, comfortable Belle: they remain steady and calm (never flashy) despite the tension. The story, the illustrations, and the meaning move in unison, working from and to tradition. Many children surely will claim this story, embracing it as their own because it speaks to them in a manner they know and recognize as traditional through its evident humanity.

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UNE RÉÉDITION QUI S'IMPOSE

Sylvette sous la tente bleue. Paule Daveluy. Montréal, Québec/Amérique, 1993, collection "Titan Jeunesse". Broché. \$7.95. ISBN 2-89037-662-1.

Le roman de Paule Daveluy est la reprise de l'édition de 1964. Dans des notes préliminaires, l'auteur se dit surprise de l'intérêt de certaines chercheuses universitaires pour ce récit; elle s'est cependant laissé convaincre de faire une nouvelle "mouture de l'original" tout en se rendant bien compte que celui-ci était lié à son époque, à une "religion omniprésente", à un féminisme "pour demain". En fait, il me semble que Paule Daveluy a un regard assez juste sur la distance entre le contexte exposé dans son roman et celui des jeunes d'aujourd'hui, quand ce ne serait, il faut malheureusement l'avouer, que de l'importance accordée à la culture classique (pièces en alexandrins que les élèves doivent mémoriser, fascination pour les auteurs consacrés); ce bagage intellectuel va de pair par ailleurs avec un certain esprit "colonisé", comme en fait foi l'admiration automatique, béate de l'héroïne devant des "comédiens français de passage"; Sylvette, à la fois vedette de troupe paroissiale et professionnelle, demeure un peu trop "petite fille de pensionnat". Ses idoles ne sont-elles pas démodées? Son "prince charmant" l'impressionne par son "raffinement", par sa rhétorique de charmeur au romantisme passablement désuet. Egalement, le ton du roman se distingue de celui qu'on trouve en général dans les romans québécois contemporains pour la jeunesse. Il ne réussit pas à avoir ce piquant, cette familiarité fantaisiste auxquels nous ont habitués, entre autres, les narrations de "La Courte Echelle". Par ailleurs, l'âge de Sylvette, 18 ans, ne semble pas correspondre à la grande ingénuité dont elle fait preuve. Pour tout dire, Sylvette paraît parfois davantage cousine d'Emma Bovary que des jeunes Québécoises des années 90. Des jeunes de son âge, ou d'un an de moins comme son frère cadet Gilbert, accepteraient-ils d'aussi bon gré d'être séparés de leurs amis trois longues semaines pour faire du camping en famille? Ce voyage constitue le centre du récit: Germain Forest, veuf, propose à ses enfants Sylvette, Gilbert et Michel, un bambin de six ans, trois semaines en Gaspésie en compagnie