But Where are the Words to Say

Father and Daughter Tales. Josephine Evetts-Secker. Illus. Helen Cann. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1997. 80 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-12374-2. ***Mother and Daughter Tales.*** Josephine Evetts-Secker. Illus. Helen Cann. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1996. 80 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24963-0.

Biwa in her lap, the storyteller sat unmoving on a table top, as her English-speaking friend gave a synopsis of the tale to follow, a tragedy of desire and loss, a whisper of literal meaning to gather in a listening ear. I can recall no specific details, could never pass that story along, but I have an almost visceral memory of the power of that voice, the impassioned flow of Japanese that held audience, that translated the "translation" we'd be given into a meaning grounded in, yet beyond, reference. The power of that story was in language itself, language not merely as a path to meaning, but as a meaning of its own. And the storytellers I've most remembered, the stories I've most loved, have shared something of that. I've listened, breathless, to tellers whose bodies became part of the language which carried and newly bore their agèd tales. I've paused over pages whose words, with simplicity and grace, proved unfailingly the truth of the folk wisdom about the power residual in language. That is my preoccupation, my prejudice, and that is why, despite my admiration for Josephine Evetts-Secker's recent folktale collections, and my delight in Helen Cann's almost always lovely illustrations and decorations, I have certain hesitations about these two volumes.

Evetts-Secker, a practising Jungian analyst and a teacher of English literature, has pulled together an impressive range of familiar and unfamiliar tales from diverse cultures to animate the dynamic relationships between mothers and daughters, and fathers and daughters, in folktales. The idea behind these collections is a fine one: they bring to the forefront relationships elemental in daily life and folklore, relationships coloured by a difficult ambiguity in both and often rendered far too simply in discussions of either, and they allow stories which one might not immediately think of as related to rub elbows. I relish the new ties between old tales, the echoes and unexpected resonances that arise. Sticklers might challenge the implicit definition of folktales — Evetts-Secker has

included retellings of Greek myth ("Demeter and Persephone"), Bible story ("Ruth and Naomi") and literary fairy tale ("Beauty and the Beast") as well as folktales in her collections — but the stories fit nicely into, and are important to the thematic concept of, their respective volumes. The diversity of tales subtly upholds her analytical position — simply put, that a universal meaning threads through vastly different story traditions, a collectivity which unites human passions and relationships so that a Danish heart can find some aspect of itself spoken in a Dinka tale, as a Polish story may bear upon an East Indian one. Evetts-Secker is interested in the power of stories to speak to us and to each other.

The brief notes concluding each volume fit the stories she has retold into categories pertinent to such an inquiry: for instance, "women and nature," "women and housekeeping," "witches and goddesses," "the father and marriage," "feeling and transformation" and "the community of women." In doing this, Evetts-Secker makes that elbow rubbing I love more overt, ensures that readers find her connections, although such finding doesn't preclude the existence of other connections. Perhaps because I am a quiet elbow-rubber, I bridle a bit at these notes: of course, Evetts-Secker cannot provide a thorough reading of the nodes of likeness these stories share, but the very necessary brevity of her notes undercuts the complexity of the similarities she points to by overlooking both the cultural and internal integrity of each tale. Preserving cultural flavour becomes the lot of Cann's illustrations; the stories become exempla, indicators of a sociological or psychological condition, rather than the beautifully crafted gifts of language I sought when I opened the volumes.

Evetts-Secker's retellings, when separated from her notes, are competent but rarely compelling. She tones down certain elements of the tales: one particularly heinous stepmother, for instance, is merely left by her husband at the end, when a devotee of folktales knows she should have been subjected to cruel death — nothing short of a horse-drawn barrel of nails for that one, I'd say. The passion, the intensity of crime and punishment, frustration and love, seem muted in some of these tales, not quite bowdlerized, but defused to fit a scale of conduct foreign to the folk realm. That defusing marks the language of these tales too. Reading them I am aware that it is the story and its theme, not the vehicle of the story, that matter to their teller. These stories *are* matter, solid. No feather, no ether. And it is here that my critical prejudice interferes with my reading of these books. I like much of what Evetts-Secker has done here, and if I'm right about her impetus for collecting these tales, I like why she has done so, although I don't share her Jungian allegiances. But for me the core of a tale lies elsewhere: in the shaping of language that lifts the heart. Given a choice between these books, which I readily admit to enjoying, and any of the recent collections by storytellers and folklorists like Virginia Hamilton, Dan Yashinsky, or the incomparable Alice Kane, I'd put aside Evetts-Secker's collections.

In fairness, I must say that my ten-year-old daughter loves these books: she reads them herself and asks to have them read to her. They are a family experience, even as they chronicle family experience. And so in many respects, these volumes are very successful. Helen Cann's illustrations are beautiful, combining a folksy flavour with culturally specific detail that is most winning.

The borders she has created for the bottom of most pages are marvelous — they catch key elements of each tale and hold them gently for a reader, creating a dialogue of image and tale that adds a needed lyricism to the volumes. Those borders almost do what Evetts-Secker's language doesn't. Almost. *If* there is a universal for me in folk tales, it is the beauty of human voices, of human languages, raising one improbable moment out of the muck of whatever we are. When I finish these books, I am left wondering, where are the words to say the strength of the human heart, to speak our frailties, our nobility, our dailiness. There is much of value and substance in these books, much to delight in and enjoy, but those words, that lift — they are not here.

***Marnie Parsons** is an independent scholar, an editor of poetry and a lover of folktales. A biwa is a Japanese stringed musical instrument.*

Pig Heaven: Growing Up in the Barnyard

Frankie on the Run. Linda Holeman. Illus. Heather Collins. Boardwalk Books, 1995. Unpag. $5.99 paper. ISBN 1-895681-09-X. ***Gruntle Piggle Takes Off.*** Jean Little. Illus. Johnny Wales. Viking, 1996. Unpag. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-86340-8.

As long as there have been children and pigs, astute adults have seen the connections between them. Even before Lewis Carroll immortalized the relationship with the startling depiction of a "pig-baby," the similarities were there to be remarked on.

Neither Jean Little nor Linda Holeman flinches when confronting the reader with a thinly-veiled pig-hero/heroine, really meant as a vehicle for any self-respecting child to identify with. Any children's writer worth her salt knows that children's books are about the traumas of growing up, and the pigs in the titles know that theirs is definitely a quest for independence.

But what does a pig and/or child have to look forward to in the big, wide grown-up world? Holeman's book is a kissing cousin to classics like E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* in some respects, though its take on the human world has no satiric edge. In Holeman's book, Frankie is pure pig in terms of the situation he finds himself in, even though endowed with child-like behaviour and perceptions. Like White's celebrity pig, Wilbur, Frankie is in danger of becoming bacon and finds it hard to believe that Farmer Halley would deceive him so treacherously. Like Wilbur, Frankie escapes to a better world, not through wit, alas, but more through happenstance, and finds himself not at a fair, but at a more benign if less glamourous destination: a petting zoo. Independence Day, it seems, can be best be celebrated if you can "earn your keep" and get a job. Fast friends, à la E.B. White, seem a preferable alternative, to my way of thinking. I hate to think that independence means making your way in the world by becoming a love-object to children, even if the work is easy, and even if Frankie does save his own bacon by doing it. It beats living on the