

## Folktales and Resonance with Tradition

*Necklace of Stars*. Veronica Martenova Charles. Stoddart, 1996. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-29674. "*Mind Me Good Now!*" Lynette Comissiong. Illus. Marie Lafrance. Annick, 1997. 32 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-482-6. *The Enormous Potato*. Aubrey Davis. Illus. Dusan Petricic. Kids Can, 1997. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-386-4. *The Fish Princess*. Irene N. Watts. Illus. Steve Mennie. Tundra, 1996. 24 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-366-9. *Simply Ridiculous*. Virginia Davis. Illus. Russ Willms. Kids Can, 1995. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-107-1. *Som See and the Magic Elephant*. Jamie Olivero. Illus. Jo'Anne Kelly. Hyperion, 1995. Unpag. \$20.95 cloth. ISBN 0-786-800-259. *The Vision Seeker*. James Whetung. Illus. Paul Morin. Stoddart, 1995. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-29666.

Each of these picture storybooks for younger readers owes various debts to tradition: four ("*Mind Me Good Now!*", *The Enormous Potato*, *Simply Ridiculous* and *The Vision Seeker*) are direct retellings of traditional folktales; two (*Necklace of Stars* and *The Fish Princess*) are original stories which rely heavily on folk elements; and the seventh work (*Som See and the Magic Elephant*) is a story invented after a folk style. The group raises significant questions about the operation and evaluation of traditions in children's literature. Ultimately, the success of each work rests in its engagement with and respect for the demands of the tradition(s) at play in its conception and presentation.

Both Aubrey Davis and Virginia Davis approach their tellings as knowing outsiders: he is a professional storyteller; she, a prominent librarian and consultant. There are stories to be told and they tell them exceedingly well, but neither book offers the insight into oral tradition — particularly its function and significance — that Comissiong and Whetung provide as insiders to the cultures represented through their narrations. "*Mind Me Good Now!*" and *The Vision Seeker* invite modern young readers into literary experiences where they encounter the real mystery and power of oral tradition, be it a cultural other or their own heritage tradition.

Quite another manner of tradition is central to *Simply Ridiculous*: namely, the conventions of nonsense, a venerable tradition within children's literature. Silly, impatient Willy consults an elder first to learn the gender of his unborn child and later to ask about a name for the baby boy. He forgets the name and tells his tale of woe to a passerby who exclaims, "Why, it's simply ridiculous," which Willy consequently calls the child. The quality of the ridiculous exudes throughout the book, emphasized in the illustrations, which are certainly captivating and decidedly modern in aspect yet consistent with this timeless tale. This book is, then, highly successful because it celebrates (even by citing a source) the demands of the traditions it employs.

*The Enormous Potato* falls short of its full potential as a book to read to the very young because Davis and Petricic do not achieve a marriage of text and illustrations, the paramount tradition operative in the picture-book genre. Davis artfully tells the humorous story of a farmer who plants a potato eye

which grows into a mammoth potato that in turn requires a team (accumulated through incremental repetition) to harvest and eventually to eat until, like the story, it is gone. The illustrations are in vivid and intense colours (blue against golden-yellow background), of bold yet starkly simple design — common characteristics of the best storybooks — yet the pictures are strangely at odds with the story. The central figure bears more resemblance to a cartoon detective or a video game character than a farmer, pictorially evoking competition in an electronic age, a value at odds with the implicit message of this venerable story, namely the potential for accomplishment through cooperation. A commitment to market appeal has seemingly assumed primacy over tradition to this work's detriment.

In "*Mind Me Good Now!*" Lynne Comissiong deftly transposes oral tradition into a written text, maintaining the immediacy of oral tale-telling. A



Illustration from *The Enormous Potato*

specialist in Caribbean folklore and head of the Trinidad public library system, Comissiong is able to present this cautionary tale with integrity and cultural veracity by working within the conventions of children's literature as well as within oral tradition. Such credentials are shared by few who continue to exploit traditional tales as fodder for children's books which, for the most part, benefit neither the traditions and cultures being presented nor the youthful reader. Comissiong's unselfconscious use of local dialect, rhyme, and repetition are most important in enticing readers into the Hansel and Gretel-like tale of two disobedient children who fall under the spell of the supernatural *Cocoya*, a frightening female figure, whom they outwit through exposure to natural sunlight which destroys her. Marie Lafrance's lively illustrations resonate the same playful yet intense mood and convey the Caribbean culture in tone and image.

Text and illustration likewise mesh in *The Vision Seeker*, a powerful

tale of how the Anishinaabe people received the first Sweat Lodge. A practitioner of the Sweat Lodge teachings himself, James Whetung recounts the story of Little Boy's vision quest with conviction and the intent of promoting informed appreciation for First Nations' traditional knowledge among contemporary non-Natives and preserving the teachings for today's aboriginal youth. This telling is traditional in substance, cadence, and form, opening with a greeting and identification of the speaker by spirit name and clan affiliation. The teller is merely a narrator, not a performer, crisply giving voice to the teachings which relate the events of Little Boy's quest and his encounters with the Seven Grandfathers of his people who give him gifts necessary to begin the healing of his society. In keeping with custom, a traditional salutation also closes the text. Morin's paintings are culturally appropriate, full of symbolism, and deft (except in his human representations). Apart from a jarring design flaw (stark white type on darkly-coloured pages), this is a fine book which engenders inter-racial understanding and real appreciation of oral heritage.

By contrast, *Som See and the Magic Elephant* is a post-colonial anachronism, exploiting the tradition of an *exotic other* for didactic purposes; it imitates folklore and passes the result off as culturally correct. This is a simple story of a girl helped to cope with her grandmother's death by a magnificent supernatural elephant. The narrative line is amplified with cultural details and supplemented by illustrations based on traditional silk-dyeing techniques. Yet the book has no claim to tradition as a supposed "original folktale" (a term that is an oxymoron). However well-intentioned, it is simply the self-conscious and limited invention of two artists rather than the product of a people, communally owned and handed down over time through tradition.

*The Fish Princess*, while a distinctly better story, also uses tradition, but in a sometimes confusing way. The narrative, while replete with traditional motifs, lacks resolution and confounds even a careful reader. A foundling girl, reared in isolation by a grandfather figure, is strangely drawn to the sea. She angers the local people by freeing a large salmon from a net, is rewarded with a circlet of gold, and subsequently captures and sacrifices this salmon king to be united with him. The work bespeaks Celtic traditions in particular, but is perplexing rather than compelling because the eclectic elements do not coalesce as in true folktales, honed through many tellings by different narrators. In keeping with Tundra's established tradition of children's books as works of art, the illustrations are what distinguish this work.

Certainly the best of the original stories, *Necklace of Stars* is a deeply-felt work in which the author-illustrator weaves dreams, folklore, history and personal experience into an engaging tale of a young boy's commitment to his home high in the Andes. Miguel encounters the spirits of his mountain ancestors who tempt him to join them, but elects to stay where he belongs. Charles incorporates into her story specific traditions that she handles with respect; her narrative has its own integrity which is represented through

engagement with nature and various (oral, written, documentary and mystical) traditions. This book works because Charles has something of significance to say, namely a reverence for nature and the magic of the Andes. And, as C.S. Lewis would have it, a children's book is the best way for her to communicate her message.

Children's books that treat traditions with respect can be compelling and enhance the intellectual and emotional understanding of young readers. But disregard for the true nature and demands of traditions — the wisdom of the ages and what has worked over time — generally results in lesser works which diminish rather than enrich children's life experiences.

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*Carole H. Carpenter is a folklorist and professor at York University where she teaches courses in the children's literature and culture, Canadian culture, and childhood in Canada.*

### The Place of History

*Zack*. William Bell. Doubleday Canada, 1998. 169 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25711-2. *The Last Safe House*. Barbara Greenwood. Illus. Heather Collins. Kids Can, 1998. 120 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-509-3. *Tubman: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. Rosemary Sadlier. Umbrella, 1997. 96 pp. ISBN 1-895642-17-5. *Mary Ann Shadd: Publisher, Editor, Teacher, Lawyer, Suffragette*. Rosemary Sadlier. Umbrella, 1995. 80 pp. ISBN 1-895642-16-7.

The spring of 1999 was the time of Kosovo, cruise missiles, refugee camps, Littleton, Colorado, gun control, and Tabor, Alberta. Just over two hundred years of mass media saturation has given us a daily redefinition of the new as an ongoing renewal of something we still wish to call "history." For all of the trauma of the present, the triumph of a notion of time as history generates a counterforce of active forgetting that utilizes the shock of the new as way of forgetting yesterday's concerns. The question of history for an information society becomes a crisis of excess: there is too much in the news *today* for us to bother with memory. The return to basics movement in Ontario's schools implies this: forget media studies and history; science and math are all that matters.

All four books here have something to do with the history of slavery in North America and make claims that history is a topic of some importance. Rosemary Sadlier's two books, *Tubman* and *Mary Ann Shadd*, operate from her perspective as President of the Ontario Black History Society. The two women who are her subjects have heroic status — leaders, revolutionar-