

but that night I couldn't sleep. The night seemed to be whispering at me, 'Amber Lightstone, there's huge stuff going on out here, and you're up there counting sheep.' I got up and went to my window.

Two stories rework traditional folk-tales with excellent results. Priscilla Galloway's retelling of Red Riding Hood in "The Good Mother" is a fine piece, which, by dovetailing SF and folktale, rings a number of changes on our expectations. Jason Kapalka's "Frosty" brings the fantasy snowman across the divide into a realistic suburban backyard, out of a sinister realm.

Two other stories are characterized by a juxtaposition of a quirky and whimsical tone and situation with an ordinariness of human reaction that has affinities with magic realism. The titles of both Charles de Lint's "A Wish Named Arnold" and James Alan Gardner's "Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large" give you a hint of what I mean. These are fine, fun stories.

The framing poems, by Alice Major and Robert Priest, are more condensed, concentrated examples of the tone of wonder that wafts through this collection. I wish there had been more poems, but then again, maintaining the standard set by Major and Priest is a tall order. As it stands, Monica Hughes has made another important contribution to our literature.

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### Fair Women, Foul Monsters, Great Stories

*The Serpent Bride: Stories From Medieval Danish Ballads.* K.V. Johansen. Thistle-down, 1998. 187 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-82-0.

Not very often does a book reviewer luxuriate into a fan. At first glance *The Serpent Bride* does not promise a lot. The cover blurb and introductory materials suggest a combination of shaman appreciation and female empowerment (both subjects which I prefer in small doses). But I read through the whole book (with critical faculties in abeyance) because I was simply wrapped up in the stories. On second reading, the critic started to kick in, and I noted that some of the dialogue had a too-contemporary feel to be an accurate transcription of mediaeval Danish ballads. Nonetheless, the pleasure remained.

*The Serpent Bride* introduces the reader to the not-widely-known world of Danish ballads. This in itself would be a valuable exercise. Danish ballads have distinct qualities that set them apart from the parallel but better-known literatures of England, France, and Germany. They retain elements of Scandinavian folklore, but adapt these to the days of knighthood.

They were composed to be sung by groups of people dancing together in

rings or lines at manor houses or in the open air. Their special feature is that these dancing songs are narratives, telling tales of bravery, romance, and sorcery. Since both men and women participated, and the lead singer was often a woman, a number of ballads have a female protagonist. Johansen chooses these stories in particular, but is not untrue to their original setting, although, as she relates in her introduction, she freely adapts and expands on her originals.

The problem with storytelling in our own make-believe world of political correctness and official Can. Lit. is that characters tend to be predictable, and, therefore, uninteresting. The preferred villains are authoritarian white males, and the preferred protagonists are empowered women and minorities. One woman filmmaker told me that she would not have received a government grant if the villain of her story had been female. But evil women are very interesting, as we know from the tabloids. Johansen creates a delightfully sinister, witchy, creepy villainess for her title story, a character very plausible, and in keeping with the dark side of Scandinavian folklore.

Another surprise was the extent of Johansen's development and "in-filling" of the narrative outlines of the ballads. While her average story runs some seventeen pages, her ballad sources are rarely longer than three or four pages. "The Serpent Bride" itself is one of the shortest of these — a mere 49 lines of verse. Some ballads tell a fairly rounded story, and here Johansen usually follows the ballad script. When, as in the title story, the background is merely hinted at, our author shows her skills in constructing a convincing and symmetrical framework for the ballad's kernel.

The stories are all romances, and overlap in form with such familiar fairytales as "Snow White," "Cinderella," and "Beauty and the Beast." (A young woman has to overcome serious obstacles, but eventually wins happiness.) Because the Danish tales are set in a definite time and place, they may remind us more of those enchanting turn-of-the-century orphan girls — Heidi, Rebecca, Anne, and Pollyanna. Johansen's retelling, however, has a spare gritty quality, which conveys a stronger sense of realism (even in the midst of trolls, dragons, witches, and other supernatural elements) than the majority of folktales. The focus is chiefly on the female protagonist, and her thoughts, feelings, and ambitions.

These Danish tales are excellent examples of the storyteller's art at its best, and in Johansen they have found a contemporary writer more than capable of doing them justice. None of the ten stories is a dud. Johansen has chosen her originals well, and has retold them in a spirited style that captures the virtues of the original and adds some psychological interest. Johansen's "rounding out" of the tales gives a satisfying fullness of treatment, which modern readers of all ages should appreciate.

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