

Cultural Diversity

The Roses in my Carpets. Rukhsana Khan. Illus. Ronald Himler. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 24 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-30923.

Here is a powerful story poignantly told about how we can stretch helping hands across the world. "It's always the same. The jets scream overhead," says the little Afghan narrator, of his recurring nightmare where he sees himself unsuccessfully fleeing the war zone with his mother and younger sister, Maha. He is probably under ten years of age, but he is already the man of the house, and vows his family will never go hungry as long as he is able to weave carpets.

The carpet represents many things, including his means of livelihood and the unity of the tribes of Afghanistan. Its colours are his way of remembering — white for his father's shroud, black for the night that hides them from the enemy, green for life, blue for the sky, and most importantly red for the blood of martyrs and for the roses that cannot be grown in his war-torn country.

As he is busy at his weaving, news comes of Maha being run over by a truck. He rushes to the hospital to comfort his mother and Maha. Fortunately all turns out well, thanks to the money that his sponsor sends for him. He is a sponsored child of a Canadian patron. Both the message and tribute are clear — Canadians sponsor children across the world; sponsorship saves children.

The illustrations in this book are very powerful — predominantly brown, the shades of tan and ochre and chocolate brown depict the ever-present dangers of war. The boy's bright carpet of roses and green tunic show his hope and gratitude as he, with his sister and mother, runs over it towards a sky of white doves, leaving behind the brown haze of a bombed landscape. I would have liked a name for the boy. This boy is not a boy we see in our everyday life, with whom a child can empathize. To build the bond of sympathy, a name might help — a typical Afghan name, perhaps.

The story and illustrations are very informative in a non-didactic way about cultural aspects, such as the muezzin's call to prayer, and the casual juxtaposition of an automobile behind a boy carrying a tray of wares on his head and a man riding on a mule. However, I am not happy about the description of his hut: "Here the walls are mud, the courtyard is mud too. It is impossible to stay clean." It seems to dismiss a whole way of life; the truth is that one can stay clean in mud huts. I would have preferred being told that it was impossible to stay clean because of the chaos created by war machines on the streets. The blurbs say these children are refugees. The story and illustrations seem to say they are children in a war-torn country.

The Foolish Men of Agra and Other Tales of Mogul India. Retold by Rina Singh. Illus. Farida Zaman. Key Porter Kids, 1996. 48 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-771-9.

The need to include our multicultural realities into our educational curriculum is well recognized by educators. As Jerry Diakiw says in a related context, educators should take advantage of the connections between Canadian literature and Canadian identity (*CCL* 87 [1997]: 36). One way is to recognize that tales of other homelands are now part of our composite heritage. These tales from India add to the growing collections of children's stories from the lands of young Canadians' parents.



*Illustration by Farida Zaman
from The Foolish Men of Agra*

Akbar was a Moghul emperor of the sixteenth century, and he ruled almost all of north India. One of his political strategies to consolidate his power was to bridge the chasm between his religion (Islam) and his subjects (Hinduism) by increasing the number of Hindus in his household (he married numerous Hindu princesses) and court. Birbal was his favourite Hindu minister, and there is a treasurehouse of stories about Birbal playing the Shakespearean clown to the king. Rina Singh has selected ten stories to retell.

I am intrigued by an aspect that someone might explore further. We know that children's stories often follow a common narrative pattern of problems and reversals; but it would be interesting to see commonalities in the storylines themselves, a Golden Bough study of stories across the world. India has fifteen official languages and as many linguistic regions. I am from south India, and I grew up with the stories of Tenali Rama, the counterpart of Birbal. In these ten stories are at least six that I have known as Tenali Rama stories. I wonder how many of these stories are found in other repertoires, for example, the story that never ends in which each of five hundred birds goes into a hut one by one and lifts a grain of rice; or the story where Birbal teaches a lesson to those who insist on a bribe by asking the Emperor to reward him with a hundred lashes and sharing it with the guard to whom he had promised as bribe half his reward. In my Tenali Rama version, Rama goes one better by separately promising each of two guards that he would give half the reward to him if he would allow Tenali Rama to enter the king's presence. He thus escapes the lashes altogether whereas Birbal gets the first fifty lashes.

The illustrations are delectably gorgeous — I could lick them off the page and gladly forego a table of Christmas goodies. Kudos to the illustrator. Farida Zaman has captured the style and content of Moghul tiles and used a border to

frame each picture. I have not seen such colours since my childhood in India.

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Protected by an Inukshuk

Dreamstones. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Stella East. Stoddart Kids, 1999. 22 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-31911.

Readers of *Dreamstones* will come out of this book with an understanding and appreciation of the nature and purpose of the Inukshuks found in the Arctic. This knowledge is augmented by the "Author's Note" at the end of the story, which provides a translation of this Inuktitut word ("to look like a person") and explains that these "compasses of the Arctic" are still used as markers "in a place where people have always had close ties to the land and each other."

By the time the "Author's Note" is read, the young reader of *Dreamstones* has already established an intimate relationship with Inukshuks, thanks to Maxine Trottier's imaginatively evocative story and Stella East's captivating illustrations. Although directed to young readers from four to five years old, this book will attract much older readers as well, due to the truly tantalizing illustrations and the layers of story. Combining some practical information about the Arctic with a story that touches the mystery and spirituality of the landscape, *Dreamstones* is both attractive and powerful.

David, the young son of the captain of the *Lily*, is unexpectedly immersed in the winter world of the Arctic, along with the crew members of the *Lily*, which is stuck in the ice that arrives earlier than expected. The creatures studied and sketched by David and his father in field notes during the summer months become mysterious and elusive during the sunless winter, which seems to go on forever. David is offered the privilege of joining the dreamlike suspension of this winter world, invited by the animals and protected by the Inukshuk. David, in the company of the Inukshuk, witnesses the return of the sun to the Arctic in a spiritual moment that unites the land, the animals and the people.

The cold of the Arctic winter, which can trap a ship for an entire season and plunge a land into darkness, is portrayed by both the story and the illustrations in a vivid manner that will impress the young reader, commanding the awe and respect felt by David. The close connection between the people and the land is embodied in this moment by the fire, in which David, wrapped in sealskin and protected by the Inukshuk, witnesses the special moment when the sun returns. This is the Arctic that can never be captured by field notes and collections. This is the Arctic that the reader, along with David, is invited to witness. We are told by the Inukshuk, "If you are patient, you will see it." As outsiders, we cherish the privilege that we sense is offered only to those who are open to the land itself.

The link between the Arctic and the European world is emphasized by the