The Parts and the Whole and the Great Cosmic Dance

The Good Companion. Joan Skogan. Illus. Stephen McCallum. Orca, 1998. 32 pp. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-134-3. ***The Great Race.*** David Bouchard. Illus. Zhong-Yang Huang. Raincoast, 1997. 32 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55192-090-5.

It was the illustrations that first suggested a comparison between these apparently very different books. Stephen McCallum is a children's illustrator, filmmaker, and animator with an impressive gift for characterization through facial expression and body language. Almost like watching television with the sound turned off, one can "read" the events and emotions that make up the story of *The Good Companion* with or without the words. And Zhong-Yang Huang, a well-known Regina artist, has a visual style that is expansive, evocative, and bold — but nonetheless full of fine and well-observed details. His colourful paintings in *The Great Race* are of a calibre seldom seen in books for children. Both these works call to mind the fabled request (one that no librarian wants to hear) for "a book full of fine colour prints, suitable for framing."

But this is not to imply that the illustrations overwhelm the stories themselves. Both narratives are confidently told in language that is concrete and direct, and both books achieve a synthesis between stories and pictures that makes them memorable at many levels.

The Great Race retraces the myth of how the Chinese zodiac came to be. Told by an old woman to her granddaughter, the story explains the order in which the twelve animals appear in the astrological cycle — and consequently why every year in turn is named for the rat, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the goat, the monkey, the rooster, the dog, and the pig. Like all good myths, *The Great Race* is also an allegory. The rat comes first in the cosmic race because he cunningly outwits the ox, who is his friend. The ox comes second because he has turned back, out of compassion, to search for the crafty rat. The tiger and the rabbit, despite their speed, are disinclined to swim across the final stretch of water, and so come third and forth. The monkey falls in love with his own reflection, and gets no further than a woodland pool. And so on — down to the last-placed pig and dog, the former encumbered by his stoutness, the latter by his loyalty.

Perceptive readers will discover for themselves the link between character and destiny that is subtly conveyed by the fable. David Bouchard refrains from moralizing. Rather, he depicts a system in which there is a place for every personality, and where balance and harmony are the highest good. Just as the strengths and weaknesses of the animal protagonists determine the order of the zodiac, so the year of one's birth determines one's personal strengths and weaknesses and one's role in the cosmic drama. Perhaps the most engaging part of *The Great Race* is the astrological chart on the last page which enables readers to locate themselves in the great scheme of things. We are invited to meditate upon the balance between our own assets and liabilities and the contribution we might make to the larger pattern.

It may seem a far cry from the Zen-like equilibrium of *The Great Race* to the dangers and discomforts of a season on a deepwater fishing boat in the North Pacific, yet *The Good Companion* is also a story about interdependency and the rhythms of life. The conflict here is between a crusty and inflexible captain and a mysterious redheaded girl who appears out of nowhere in mid-voyage and must be taken on

board. The superstitious captain loves routine and distrusts females; the girl, for her part, embodies the intuition and adaptability that are truly required to live in unity with the unpredictable ocean.

Reminiscent of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the plot of *The Good Companion* turns on a willful act of rejection, the results of which rebound painfully on the doer, eventually to his spiritual benefit. Hoping to free himself from the bad luck that a woman on shipboard will surely bring, the captain unceremoniously dumps the young intruder at the nearest port. This, of course, is when his bad luck begins. The echo of Coleridge is unmistakeable when the girl dreams the same dream as the captain and his crew: "The shared dream carried the fishermen and the redheaded girl together on a boat which became a bird that flew high above a storm, then floated easily on the great swells of the sea." Just as the act of spontaneously blessing — where once he had shown contempt — releases the Ancient Mariner from his spiritual exile, so the captain is reclaimed from a deadly storm by a moment of compassion for the girl he now imagines he sees tossed by the wild ocean. The interruption she has created in the captain's life shows the limitations of the routines he had lived by as well as the importance of being open to change. Joan Skogan uses their encounter to vividly illustrate how a strength can become a weakness and a perceived weakness a strength.

Despite their complexity and depth, both these books are intended — and are suitable — for eight- to ten-year-olds. The ideas of order, necessity, and change are conveyed in a fashion that allows the reader to consider a single part of the pattern or the greater whole that the parts comprise. Since this is, by and large, the way we make sense of the world, both *The Great Race* and *The Good Companion* are likely to suggest some of those intriguing connections between reading and experience that the best children's literature can help us to discover.

Hilary Turner *teaches English at the University of British Columbia.*

Thinking About Hard Questions in Children's Holocaust Fiction

Clara's War. Kathy Kacer. Holocaust Remembrance Book for Young Readers. Second Story, 2001. 196 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-42-8. ***Daughter of Light***. martha attema. Illus. Stephen McCallum. Orca, 2001. 133 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-179-3.

In late 1944, more than four years after the Nazis occupied the Netherlands and two weeks after the Nazis cut the electricity, Ria, the nine-year-old protagonist of martha attema's *Daughter of Light*, worries about her mother's pregnancy. Convinced that without electricity her mother cannot give birth safely, Ria decides to confront the mayor. She does this despite her father's warning that such "reckless action" will endanger them all; Ria's family is not Jewish, but her father is in hiding and the mayor is believed to be a Nazi sympathizer and possible collaborator. Yet Ria's "reckless action" proves far from futile. Sneaking into the city hall, she overhears the Nazi plan to raid a neighbour's home where they rightly suspect that Jews are hidden. By the time that the mayor complies with Ria's request and restores the