

## Old Folktales Reworked in Contemporary Colours

*Rachel Captures the Moon.* Richard Ungar. Illus. Richard Ungar. Tundra, 2001. 32 pp. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-505-X. Ages 7-10. *As For the Princess?* Adapted by Stéphane Jorisch. Illus. Stéphane Jorisch. Annick, 2001. 32 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-695-0. Ages 4-6. *The Frog Princess.* Rosalind Allchin. Illus. Rosalind Allchin. Kids Can, 2001. 32 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-000-7. Ages 5-8.

Three recent picture books rework folktales that may not be familiar to everyone, but these versions are sure to bring them wider audiences. In *Rachel Captures the Moon*, author and illustrator Richard Ungar retells "Chelm Captures the Moon," a folktale first recorded by Samuel Tenenbaum in *The Wise Men of Chelm*. Chelm is a fictional town of Jewish folklore, supposedly located in Poland, populated by dim-witted and comical villagers whose purpose is to teach that there is a little foolishness in every wise person and a little wisdom in every fool. Ungar's version of the exploits of Chelm's townspeople trying to capture the moon is guaranteed to please its readers because the wisest character is young Rachel who comes up with a clever solution to the problem. There is a "clever Rachel" in other Jewish folktales, but she is generally older; this Rachel is approximately the same age as the intended audience. Throughout the story, she tries in desperation to capture the attention of the adults as they try one doomed scheme after another. A carpenter tries to build a ladder to the moon; a cook tries to entice the moon with soup; a weaver tries to lure it to earth with a warm blanket, and so on. The fairy-tale repetition in the story and Rachel's triumph over the adults in her world make it appealing at the level of story, but the vivid illustrations, done in watercolour and coloured pencil, are perhaps the richest element of the book. They call to mind the art of Marc Chagall but feature a brighter palette and a moonlit glow. The plot of the story celebrates common sense, but the illustrations invoke a nighttime world of imagination, and the combination works beautifully.

Author and illustrator Stéphane Jorisch borrows from Québécois folklore in *As For the Princess?* This is the tale of a greedy princess and a boy with an enchanted belt that gets him into trouble. The original tale, *La Princesse au grand nez*, is found in a recent collection by Cécile Gagnon, *Mille ans de contes Québec*. Kind-hearted Simon begins the story by wishing that he might see the beautiful princess who lives over the mountains. His wish is granted, but the princess takes his magic belt and continually foils his plans to retrieve it. Simon takes his punishments in stride until the princess exhausts his strategies. Then, like a prodigal son who has misused his gifts, Simon appeals to his dead father for help, which arrives in the form of enchanted fruit, and Simon hatches a scheme to get back everything he has lost. Fairy tale elements contribute to the book's success: there are three brothers with a dead father who leaves three gifts, three trials for Simon, magic fruit that grows and retracts body parts, and a royal comeuppance for the greedy princess. However, with these elements jostling for attention in the plot, the ending (which climaxes with revenge against the princess) is not completely satisfying. Despite this minor criticism, it is a worthwhile project to keep current Canadian folktales, and Jorisch's illustrations crown the effort, striking the same balance between naivety and knowingness as that demonstrated by the character Simon. The pictures, featuring watercolour, gouache, pen and ink, and digital work, are light, whimsical, and mischievous.

A disenchanted frog is the heroine of Rosalind Allchin's *The Frog Princess*. In the brothers Grimm original, a frog insinuates herself into the life of a prince who then must find a way to release the princess trapped in the frog. Allchin's reworking of this popular story is delightful, announcing its breezy and contemporary style from the first page when the prince hurries off to a game of golf. The frog who ensnares the prince by rescuing his golf ball spends a day at his side but grows increasingly weary of the trappings of princess life. When the frog princess discovers, to her horror, that the delicacy at the evening ball is frogs' legs, she leaps back into frog life, leaving the prince and the promise of his kiss far behind. In a dramatic and funny climax, the frog rescues herself from the life of a princess with its protocol, politeness, and endless changes of clothing. Allchin's version offers a refreshing antidote to stories like *Cinderella* or *Princess Furball* where the point of the narrative is, of course, to re-establish the heroine in her rightful place as royalty. Here the frog princess is re-established in her rightful place as a frog. Allchin's illustrations are vibrant watercolours, creating a world which is medieval and Pre-Raphaelite, bright with clarity and richly-hued detail.

All three books are to be commended for bringing these folktales to wider audiences in pleasing presentations. *The Frog Princess* is appropriate for five- to eight-year olds who will understand the vocabulary and word play in the book. *As For the Princess?* is a little complicated for the age category it suggests (ages four to six) though it might hold the attention of a book-loving five- or six-year old. Five- to eight-year olds might be better able to relish the princess's punishment. *Rachel Captures the Moon* has a simplicity and beauty that makes it attractive to those younger than the intended audience (ages seven to ten) and those older too.

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*Kathryn Carter, Ph.D., is an instructor of English at Wilfred Laurier University (Brantford Campus) in Brantford, Ontario, where she recently taught children's literature, and a mother to Rachel, who is 3.*

### Larger than Life

*Of Mice and Nutcrackers*. Richard Scrimger. Illus. Linda Hendry. Tundra, 2001. 223 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-498-3. Ages 8-11. *Frogger*. Edward B. Frank. Illus. John Bianchi. Pokeweed, 2000. 141 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-894-323-19-X. Ages 8-11. *Benny Bensky and the Perogy Palace*. Mary Borsky. Illus. Linda Hendry. Tundra, 2001. 120 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-523-8. Ages 8-11.

*Of Mice and Nutcrackers*, *Frogger*, and *Benny Bensky and the Perogy Palace* share a larger-than-life quality in their situation comedies that children will love. When gym teacher Mr. Gebohm takes revenge on Jane Peeler for using the gym for a play rehearsal of *The Nutcracker* when he wants it for basketball practice, his overreaction has the surrealistic quality one might expect in the dreams and nightmares of children. Similarly, the garrulous eighty-five-year-old Cigar Davis walking in on *Frogger* during his first babysitting job is slightly offbeat, if not weird, even in a small town where oddball behaviour is pronounced; but his proceeding to oversee an excavation of the occupant's walls to find treasures he had buried when he pre-