Canadian Fantasy: Thoughts on The Golden Pine Cone

• *Mary Razzell* •

Résumé: *La romancière se sert de son expérience personnelle afin d'explorer la nature, le sens et la fonction des récits merveilleux. D'abord hostile à ce genre narratif, elle s'est convertie à la lecture du roman* ***The Golden Pine Cone*** *de Catherine A. Clark, qui lui a fait découvrir que le merveilleux aborde les questions fondamentales et amène l'enfant à croire en soi et à envisager un avenir meilleur.*

Summary: *Mary Razzell, the author of several works of fiction for young readers, uses her personal experience to probe the essential nature, meaning, and function of fantasy literature. Starting with how she read and resisted fantasy as a child, she moves to her conversion after reading Catherine Anthony Clark's* ***The Golden Pine Cone****: she came to see that good fantasy asks important and relevant questions, and it guides the child reader to believe in possibilities that give hope for a more satisfying and meaningful life.*

The Golden Pine Cone, written by Catherine Anthony Clark in 1950, is considered, to the best of my knowledge, as Canada's first children's fantasy. It does not pretend to be anything else but fantasy, and thus illustrates Bishop Butler's famous remark, "Everything is what it is and not another thing" (Barnet 294).

When I read fiction, I bring my own experiences to the story, and I am sure that everyone does. There is a symbiotic relationship created between the author and reader. So now let me confess at the beginning that my reaction to fantasy has been one of dislike, even fear.

I know the precise moment that I first had this reaction. I was five. It was in the middle of the Depression; my father was a ne'er-do-well; my Irish mother grieved. "We will leave out some milk tonight for the wee folk," she told us children. "They may take pity on us, and our luck will change." I can remember looking around our kitchen — the cracked linoleum on the floor, the stained sink, and the line of diapers strung behind the water heater — and deciding that this real world was scary enough. I wanted no part of fairies, or other fantasies, ever.

There was a brief period when I was about nine that I decided to investigate fairy stories, just in case I was missing something. At the end of two

weeks, when I'd read every book of fairy tales available in our neighbourhood library, my conclusion was the same.

Therefore, I was later greatly relieved to read in an article by Ruth Nichols that she was "sympathetic to this dislike.... I think it rests on an intuitive perception of the importance of the questions involved. The person who loathes fantasy feels at a gut level that the way the fantasist answers these questions is wrong" (Nichols 20).

How, then, does our Canadian fantasist, Catherine Anthony Clark, answer these important questions? Indeed, what *are* the questions? I know the questions I asked myself as a child: Am I loved? Will I be safe? Whom can I count on? Is the good I see around me strong enough to cancel out the evil that I also see? Can *my* wrongdoings ever be forgiven? Or is there a tally sheet, somewhere, that is never to be altered? And, if so, is it even worthwhile to try to do, and be, good? Why not take on the world on its own terms? Those terms were, it seemed to me, that those with the most power survived most successfully.

In *The Golden Pine Cone*, Clark does address these fundamental questions, and her answers are joyful. J.R.R. Tolkien has said that joy is essential to a good fairy story: "... this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well.... In its fairy tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace...." (285). In addition, the reader is caught up into a sense of wonder and, as pointed out by Max Luthi, "... is fascinated ... by the overcoming of dangers and entry into the realm of glory, whether this is depicted as the realm of the sun and stars or as an earthly kingdom of unearthly splendour" (299).

Jack Zipes also emphasizes the importance of wonder in children's literature, stating, "The characters, settings and motifs are combined and varied according to specific functions to induce wonder ... Wonder causes astonishment, and is manifested in a marvellous object or phenomenon, it is often regarded as a supernatural occurrence and can be an omen or portent. It gives rise to admiration, fear, awe, and reverence" (373).

In her wondrous story, Clark places the children in a safe and loving home, with two good parents. The children's upbringing is exemplary, and Bren and Lucy thrive. They are good-natured children with a strong sense of moral values. Yet, all the while, they delight in the world around them. With their vivid imaginations and love of adventure, they seem to embody the spirit of childhood.

And although they are children, they know their place in the household: to be obedient to their parents and to contribute by doing chores:

> Lucy was nine years old, but already she could dust and sweep and cook simple things.
>
> Bren was nearly eleven.... He often went in the boat with his father to pick up stray logs on the beach, and when the Father had a boom of logs to take to the mill, Bren went along to help with the launch....

It is becoming obvious then, to me as the child reader, that safe homes do exist, as do good parents, and that good behaviour is conducive to an orderly, happy life. *I could do that,* whispers the child in me. *And I could make such a home,* says the future adult.

But what about the larger questions of good and evil? A major theme in *The Golden Pine Cone* is the tension between the two forces that runs throughout the story. We learn that evil must be held in check, and that that is only possible when we recognize evil and choose to do good to overpower it. Ooska, the dog, specifically tells Lucy how this principle operates in the Other World:

> the only way to keep order in the Other World is for Tekontha to reign with absolute power ... Nasookin ... can defy her; and he is troublesome enough as it is.

The children's choice to do what is right — by returning the earring to its rightful owner, Tekontha — will also make it possible for Ooska to be forgiven for his past wrongdoings. He explains:

> 'I did a bad, cruel thing once.... And three Squareheads caught me at it.... Then I escaped.... I have now committed two crimes against Tekontha....'

Bren is quick to grasp the necessity of making restitution to obtain forgiveness:

> 'But if we got the earring back to Tekontha, she might forgive you — that's it, isn't it?' asked Bren.

Not only does Clark answer my fearful questions, she also takes me to a land of enchantment. The story is set in the beautiful Kootenay Lake area in British Columbia. The Other World she develops there is, in itself, a collection of smaller worlds.

And what worlds they are! Beyond the real world of Leaping Creek, with its tunnel under the highway to prevent cattle from crossing, it is a world of neighbours and card games and meetings in the Hall.... Of cars and trains and the lights of the town, of schools and chores. Mists rise over the fields; the lake water laps on pale, bare sand spits. Beyond the lake are sloughs, marsh grass, golden cottonwood and red willow.

With what ease the children move in and out of this real world to the Other Worlds:

> Nasookin was bellowing from the pasture. And then came the purr and roar of a car. Headlights flashed round the bed; the deer leapt down into the creek. The wolves, following, crashed into a bunch of alder, one upon the other.

We enter the World of the Lake. Above the lake's surface can sometimes be seen the Floating Island. Below the lake live the Pearlies, the Warden Fish, and that symbol of evil, the Lake Snake. As a child, I have stood in lake mud and felt it ooze through my toes and have peered over the edge of a boat into the depths

of a lake and seen snags covered with slimy, green growth. I have never doubted that there is a snake down there. I *know*. It is as Ursula Le Guin says, "... fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true" (34). In *The Golden Pine Cone*, I am taken down into this fearful world and made to experience it in all its terror. How glad I am that Bren is brave enough to kill the Lake Snake. I conclude that we need more Brens in the real world. Perhaps I could be like him?

The movement from one Other World to another is energetic and, at times, dizzying, with much the same "spinning-top" quality of the artist Emily Carr's little pine trees which whirl, ecstatic with the joy of creation.

We come to the Valley of Nasookin, and here Clark introduces the Indian way of life, with its hunting, long houses, music and songs. Although lately it has become fashionable to criticize such "appropriation" of native culture, I found the Indian motif to be an integral part of the story. I soon forgot I was reading about Indians and, in fact, identified them only as the first people to live here.

Now onward in our questing journey to the cabin owned by Bill Buffer. There we learn of the World of The Prospectors:

> They sang of the limestone caverns bored by the tireless water in the arteries of the mountains, and of the Rock Spirits in mica armour that sit in caves and listen to the landslides they have started.

There is yet another World that we only hear about in Bill's cabin, although we have been made aware of the wood spirits:

> The Squareheads sang like the boom of creeks in the springtime. Their songs were of the tall timber, and of the rushing rivers at flood and the dance of the spiked boots on twirling logs.

There seems to be no end to the strange and wonderful Other Worlds that Catherine Anthony Clark imagines. We wonder if Lucy and Bren will ever reach their goal of the Valley of Tekonta. We have one last kingdom to conquer, the World of the Ice Witch. Located at the bottom of a crevasse, brilliant with ice, and terrifying with slippery slopes, it is guarded by a huge owl. The owl is a symbol of death of First Nations people; the children are aware of its "fusty smell." The late George Woodcock has written, "Indians regarded the owls as the harbinger of death who called out the names of those about to depart from life ... and believed the souls of the dead were transformed into owls" (7). Certainly, there are signs of death everywhere in this ice kingdom.

> Here, cased in ice blocks, were beasts and skeletons of beasts from the days when the world was young ... flattened frameworks of creatures from before the Flood.

I surrender. I am now back at the very beginnings of Canada.

At last, we reach the enchanted Valley of Tekontha, the ruling Spirit of the region:

> Far off stood a mountain of black-glass obsidian and from sapphire cliffs fell thread-like falls, white with foam. The mists gathered and dissolved and gathered again, and nothing was seen but in part.

All these Worlds are truly enchanted. The critics agree. Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman write: "Clark's concept of fantasy is best described as enchanted realism, a term that has its origin in the art style of magic realism" (Egoff and Saltman 232). Saltman adds later that it is "marked by a sense of otherness. It is touched by the magical, by a reality different from that of daily life" (69).

C.S. Lewis has written of the value of this kind of writing: "In a sense a child does not long for fairyland.... Does anyone suppose that he really and prosaically longs for all the dangers and discomfort of a fairly tale? — really wants dragon?... It is not so. It would be much truer to say that fairyland arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his lifelong enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach, and far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods; the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing" (1078).

That is the story of my conversion.

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