

Fantasy — Canadian Style

The Golden Pine Cone. Catherine Anthony Clark. Harbour, 1994. 200 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55017-085-6.

A brother and a sister find a golden pine cone and undertake a quest to return it to its rightful owner, the earth spirit Tekontha. They encounter talking animals — a dog, geese, the Lake Snake, the mammoth; forces of nature — the Pearl Folk, the Ice Folk, Frogkins, Tree Spirits, Tekontha herself; and people — Nasookin, his wife Onamara, the prospector Bill Buffer. Some of these creatures help them, but others are enemies whom they must defeat. This may sound like a familiar fairytale formula; yet, this story is fresh, original, and uniquely Canadian.

The Golden Pine Cone, originally published in 1950 and recently reprinted by Harbour Publishing, after a journalistic campaign calling for the re-issuing of the book, has been called the first Canadian fantasy. It is also a book very much suited to the 1990s — the children are selfless in their quest to save the environment, brave and generous, never abandoning their goal or their friends, and even forgiving and redeeming their enemy Nasookin. The values promoted are a respect for nature and for humanity, and a belief in the goodness and courage of children. The children themselves, with the help of the natural environment, return the golden pine cone, as well as the heart of the princess loved by Nasookin, and restore harmony to their wilderness world.

Clark's book is indeed Canadian, with its emphasis on nature and Native values, yet with some subtle influences of classical mythology and British fantasy. *The Golden Pine Cone* was published in the same year as C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and shares with it a heroine named Lucy, an ice witch or queen who can "freeze" people, talking animals, and an emphasis on nature. Nevertheless, the differences between the books are significant and may help us define "Canadian" fantasy. In Lewis's book, nature is symbolic and controlled by a father-god figure, though threatened by an evil female. In Clark's book, Nature has a life of its own, is powerful in its own right and not easily controlled by real or supernatural figures. A mother-goddess figure is its protector, not its controller. Lewis's underlying message relates closely to the story of Christ, while Clark promotes values not tied to any one religion. Also, Clark's children do not enter a different world, but remain in their own in an altered state which allows them to understand and see people, creatures, and forces of nature not normally visible to humans. Unlike Narnia, which represents a perfect England entered only after death, Lucy and Bren's Canadian wilderness exists in the here and now for those sensitive enough to observe and listen to nature, animals, and Native dwellers.

Clark's clear, crisp language evokes the breathtaking scenery and brings to life the action of the plot. The language is perfectly matched by Greta Guzek's illustrations, which possess the same combination of realism and fantasy, Native and White forms of art, expressing a view of humans as individuals who are different from, yet connected to, the animals and natural life surrounding them.

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