

MYTH AND MAGIC IN MALL AND MOTEL

Ran Van : A Worthy Opponent. Diana Wieler. Douglas & McIntyre, Toronto/Vancouver, 1995. 185 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-219-X.

The middle member in a trilogy should hold its own: this one does. Its packaging looks familiarly disposable and raises certain expectations of the quick read. However, Diana Wieler is not enslaved by message-obsessed critical pedagogy: the reader has room to manoeuvre. In seeking recourse to timeless tales, she modifies and subverts them in order to reveal contemporary situations, characters, and problems. Familiar conventions are reworked for a new breed of reader.

Ran Van conforms to time-honoured patterns: he is orphaned through the murder/suicide of his parents and must look back beyond anger through traces, hints and guesses to what "they must have been like." The past intersects with the present: through faded photos and fragments of speech, Rhan reconstructs what he needs. While the absence of parents is a useful heuristic device, there remain certain limitations on the morbidity of the dead when they are known in the bones of a still-very-much-alive aunt and grandmother in the local motel. The wise old woman whose magic power is sometimes eclipsed is nonetheless the "fixed point in the turning world" of the questing young knight. And a thinly-disguised Beatrice called Kate functions in the story as both girlfriend and ideal. The book is aimed unabashedly at young males. The women — Gran, Zoe, Kate — are forceful enough characters, yet their main function in the novel is to further the journey of the unlikely, bespectacled hero. One need only check out the mall to see who's playing.

The parallelism in the novel's characterization and structure invites the reader to play intertextual games with other novels, TV shows, or films. For example, on Gemini Planet, the video universe which plays in point and counterpoint with Rhan's everyday world, the forces for good and evil are identical twins and, as always, penetrating beneath appearance to reality is complex and tricky. And Ashtar and Rumpelstiltskin — myth and fairy tale — are essential for communication when the Iceman finally cometh and observes from the depths of his isolation: "Well, you know, the gods are always setting up tests. And you don't screw with destiny." Ran Van counters, "You always have a choice" ... "We're not just bits of light ... It's got to be more than that." This romance sticks to the conventions of its own genre, challenging the bleak determinism of much popular literature written for the young adult market. Rhan's life need not proceed inexorably to murder and suicide: he has a choice. And, of course, as the publishers make certain we know, the whole tale is not yet told.

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