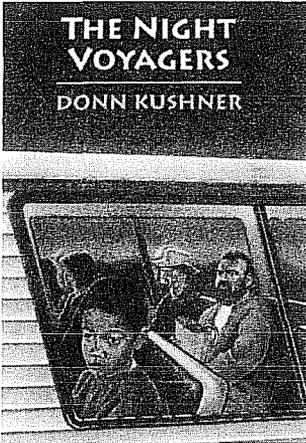


## THE PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY IN *THE NIGHT VOYAGERS*

*The Night Voyagers*. Donn Kushner. Lester Publishing Ltd., 1995. 224 pp., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-69-8.



*The Night Voyagers* follows a Central American family on their journey to freedom in the North, after the military slaying of the young protagonist's father. The brutality of military dictatorship, torture, and killing by death squad is formidably handled by Donn Kushner through indirect representation, from the emotional and psychological point of view of Manuel. In an age when video games, comics, movies and all their related money-making and propaganda generating machines promote lust for violence, a novel based on the contemporary historical fact of human rights abuses serves as a sobering and thought-provoking antidote to the glamorizing of war and death so prevalent in mainstream children's culture.

Donn Kushner seems to agree with other children's writers that the absence of myths in children's lives produces disorientation and anxiety. This novel incorporates elements from the *Popul Vuh*, one of the sacred books of the Maya, thereby associating evil with the Lords of Xibalba, the Land of Death, of which Manuel's father had told him stories. While the combination of historical and supernatural events works well to express Manuel's repression and later resolution of the traumatizing memory of his father's death, and also situates the family's struggle in a cultural context, two problems arise: the author's representation of pre-Columbian cosmology reveals an obvious Judeo-Christian bias, and the universalizing force of myth depoliticizes the concrete and historical causes of human rights abuses.

Pre-Columbian cosmology shares the Judeo-Christian division of the world into zones of good and evil, life and death, but departs radically from the hierarchical Western world view, according to which evil ultimately must be annihilated. The Pre-Columbian vision accepts death and war as the necessary complements of life and peace, the two sides of this opposition held in a dynamic struggle ensuring the very continuity of existence. The cosmic notion of complementarity, however, should not be confused with historical situations that have tangible political causes and therefore merit such activism as the Sanctuary movement represented in *The Night Voyagers*.

It is understandable that Manuel would associate all characters who seem to embody evil or somehow perpetuate it (the murderous soldiers, the immigration officials and informants in the U.S.) with the metamorphosing creatures of the mythical stories his father told him, but while myth appears to help Manuel make sense of the dangers surrounding his family, it actually confuses him and extends

the force of abstract and universal evil into the contemporary context. This universalizing aspect of myth may provide people with a philosophical concept of evil, but the historical thrust of the text would seem to demand political solutions to what is represented not as an abstract form of evil, but rather a complex social and political problem. While Kushner draws relevant connections between the current genocide in Central America and similar actions in Canadian history, by relating these injustices to the universalizing force of myth, he seems to suggest that evil is abstract and inevitable, a message that young readers may find fatalistic and depressing despite the novel's happy ending.

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### A SPIRITUAL QUEST

**Dance of the Snow Dragon.** Eileen Kernaghan. Thistledown Press Ltd., 1995. 325 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-41-3.

This book, set in eighteenth-century Bhutan, is based on Tibetan Buddhist accounts of the mystical journey to Shambhala, beyond the furthest snow peaks. Kernaghan uses the narrative of the quest to shape her story. The protagonist, Sangay Tenzing, chosen as a young child to become a monk at the prestigious White Leopard Dzong begins his physical and spiritual journey at eight years of age. After years of daily religious lessons and physical labour endured by all *gaylongs* (novices), Sangay learns that he will never become one of the sacred dancers, something he has always yearned for. Now thirteen, he can see in his mind's eye the complexities of the ritual dances and even compose new ones, but his feet cannot follow his heart or head.

Unsure of his chosen path, Sangay retreats to a hermitage to meditate for 100 days. There he has a vision of a wondrous kingdom headed by a besieged and dying king. And he knows that only when the True Dance of the Gods is performed will Shambhala and everything else he holds dear be saved. Sangay's quest is to travel to this far-off land to witness the dance/battle. On his journey, Sangay meets with a female *lung-gom-pas* (sorcerer-lama) and joins forces with her to complete his quest. On their travels they encounter many physical difficulties as well as spiritual challenges embodied by demons and ghosts. Once at Shambhala, Sangay, using the magic he learned from the sorceress, creates a new dance that releases the spell-bound king and all his minions. Once the barbarians are driven from the land, a final test reveals that Sangay is a *tuklu* — an incarnation of a great Tibetan hero. But his journeys are not ended; now he is to become a life-long seeker of knowledge and wisdom.

This is an extremely detailed, beautifully written novel. Like all good quest stories, the protagonist encounters increasingly difficult challenges on his journey to the ultimate goal. The goal, of course, in young adult novels is the