The Disruption and Healing of Legends, Myths and the Supernatural

A Light in the Dunes. martha attema. Orca, 1997. 176 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-085-1. ***Draugr***. Arthur G. Slade. Orca, 1997. 171 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-094-0. ***Soulworm***. Edward Willett. Royal Fireworks, 1997. 236 pp. $10 paper. ISBN 0-88092-411-X.

These three novels for young teens employ a combination of myth, legend and the supernatural to align our everyday world with more powerful, spiritual realms. Playing with the degree to which phenomena are supernatural or real, these books succeed in raising provocative questions about the relationships between the past and present, as well as the supernatural and the familiar, often pitting the mysterious and inexplicable against the factual and rational.

A Light in the Dunes, the strongest of these books, takes place in Ameland, a small island in the Netherlands, and incorporates the legend of Rixt into its text. Rixt, a woman/ghost/witch who lured boats and sailors to be shipwrecked on the shore, is a familiar Siren-like figure, and her beachcombing activity is pursued in the present time by the protagonist and first person narrator of the novel, Rikst. The references to the legend and recent history (including World War II bunkers) of Ameland, along with the depiction of the contemporary lifestyle of these island dwellers, results in an evocative portrayal of this specific place. The place and lifestyle, however, could in many respects be claimed as strikingly familiar by young Canadian coastal or island readers.

martha attema deftly introduces a gentle feminist agenda into this novel, examining the reversal of those traditions during *Sunderklazen* that had seen "the men rule the streets" (56). As well, the plight of Rixt and Rikst's mother as young, pregnant girls, treated as outcasts in the past by this conventional society, is now viewed more compassionately. Too late to affect the legendary Rixt, this tolerance will heal those still living on Ameland, bringing together the generations and the genders, crossing barriers once perceived as impenetrable. As the sea erodes the coast of this island, forcing the people to erect barriers of sand and vegetation to save the land, the social barriers begin to erode with the approval and participation of the island's inhabitants. The situation of Rikst and her family closely parallels that of the legendary Rixt, for whom she is named; when the two stories intersect, misunderstanding and judgment are replaced by much needed compassion and tolerance. The legend of Rixt exists in oral and written fragments that are actually put together by Rikst as she writes the story in a fairly postmodern way, filling the gaps with imaginative fiction. This telling of the story through the picking up of various pieces is a process already familiar to Rikst in her beachcombing.

Arthur G. Slade's *Draugr* similarly weaves the stories of the past with the action of the present. Using Icelandic mythology, Slade incorporates the "draugr," the undead man or ghost, into his story set in Gimli, Manitoba. These myths are more authoritative in their official written form than the

scattered fragments of Rixt's stories, and as such have more power, affecting the real world in a destructive and alarming manner. More firmly established in the supernatural than *A Light in the Dunes, Draugr* leaves areas unexplained, as the power and suggestion of the draugr infiltrate Grandfather's cottage. Three American youths — Sarah, the narrator; Michael, her brother; and Angie, their cousin — are visiting their grandfather in Canada, and have actual contacts with draugr-like creatures. Whereas Rikst's sighting of Rixt is eventually explained as the sighting of the evil, but real, Ice-Woman many of the events in *Draugr* are left as supernatural. The possibility of rational explanation is introduced and then undermined.

The intersection of the supernatural and real world in this novel does not so much comment on or heal the contemporary world as it challenges the complacent scepticism of the Gimli community. Characters such as Grandfather and Althea have literally carried their past from Iceland to Gimli in their volumes of mythology, which, as Grandfather explains, describe "old sagas [that] aren't Hollywood movies. They're gritty. Full of blood and smoke and tough characters. Kind of like the people who settled Iceland. And Gimli, come to think of it" (42). The respect for living books and a living past distinguishes Grandfather and Althea as individuals who believe in the importance and power of myths. The youngest generation, now touched by the words of the Icelandic language and the myths, is not likely to relinquish the inherent power of these words.

The suspense in Slade's novel is relieved by humour, particularly focused on the stereotypes of Americans and Canadians, and significantly based in language. Brand, from Gimli, asks "Why don't you say *Y'all* and all that stuff" (33). Michael replies, "Why don't you say *eh* all the time?" (33).

Set in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, and a parallel world, Wardfast Mykia, *Soulworm*, the weakest of these novels, is a fast moving, sensational story which deals with the manifestation of evil and the possibility of parallel worlds. Although the reader does empathize with Liothel, an Acolyte from Mykia who suddenly finds herself responsible for the destruction of the soulworm on earth, the suspense of the novel is compromised by the assurance in the reader's mind that Liothel will find her Talents and human support in time to carry out the task thrust upon her. There is some fascination with the malevolence and power of the evil generated by the soulworm as it expresses itself though an individual previously without evil, and threatens to enter humans already displaying antisocial and aggressive behaviour even without the influence of the soulworm. However, the intersection of the two worlds, rather than enriching the settings of Mykia and Weyburn, leaves both rather superficial and stereotypical. For readers fascinated by the concept of parallel worlds, however, there is some room for speculation.

Each of these novels offers multidimensional perspectives providing insight into the nature of readers' everyday worlds and families. Misunderstandings among friends and family members are the result of the natural world's convergences with the legendary, mythological and supernatural worlds. However, the resulting disruptive forces are responsible for provid-

ing the unusual experiences and perspectives that inspire the characters and readers to look more carefully and openly at the complexities of relationships and identity.

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The Liar Tells the Truth

The McIntyre Liar. David Bly. Tree Frog Press, 1993. 222 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88967-069-2.

Smart aleck kid takes the car out for a joyride, smashes it up. Punishment: sent away for the summer to a ranch where he learns about real work and grows up a little. Sounds like a cliché of a plot, doesn't it? Well it is. But any cliché can be taken up and made into something true and real, and in the hands of an intelligent writer like David Bly, this cliché has become a memorable, funny, wise novel.

This is an epistolary novel, a series of letters written by Kevin Winslow to his friend at home in Calgary, detailing his doings on the McIntyre ranch where he has been sent into exile. Well, exile is how he sees it at first, as he rails in arrogant superiority about his fellow-workers and whines incessantly about his lot. But with a deft touch Bly manages to convey the uncertainty behind Kevin's bluster. When he tries to be patronizing to the other farm hands, they either undercut him with their own wit or graciously sidestep his awkward jabs. Luckily, Kevin is smart enough to be aware of this, and of course he begins to learn as he begins to pay attention.

Notably lacking in sentimentality, the great strength of this novel is its characterization. As Kevin — who quickly earns the nickname "Muskrat" after a muddy accident — learns more about the others who work with him on the ranch, he finds all his preconceptions falling to pieces in his hands. There is a murderer with a melancholy cloud of guilt hovering over him, a harmonica-playing Hutterite who has forsaken his past, and a troubled genius called Windy who, as Kevin says, "knows everything there is to know except what's useful." Windy is the most interesting character in the book, a fount of information both arcane and in fact, very often useful. He encourages Kevin to carry on with a miniature in-house newspaper, the "McIntyre Liar" of the title, and becomes his best reader. But Windy, who in fact suffers more from a surfeit of sanity than any insanity, is not destined for happiness, and when he must leave the ranch, a genuine pall of sadness falls over the book, and Kevin begins to feel "scared of what life can do to you" (184).

Bly's range is wide and his voice usually true. While Kevin's ingenu-