

## Messages for Our Times: From a Cat and a Cove

*Fog Cat*. Marilyn Helmer. Illus. Paul Mombourquette. Kids Can, 1998. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-460-7. *Driftwood Cove*. Sandra Lightbourn. Illus. Ron Lightbourn. Doubleday Canada, 1998. 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25626-4.

While *Fog Cat* and *Driftwood Cove* share a maritime setting (the former uses the east coast and the latter the west) the spiritual difference lies in how profound their respective lessons are: "realizing how to accept the ebb and flow of life" versus "consumerism isn't shared by all." Although *Driftwood Cove* figures more immediately as the timely instruction, it fails to connect to the heart. *Fog Cat* quietly accomplishes the deeper, lasting mark.

In *Driftwood Cove* we are given a carefully revealed adventure of discovery thanks to Sandra Lightbourn's word-smith expertise. It has just a touch of mystery to justify the dreamy realism of Ron Lightbourn's art. From the driftwood endpaper stock to the scuffed-edge visuals (thanks to soft-ware-induced rustification), this is a relaxing read; the pace is fluid and a nice change from the jolts-per-second school of "youth literature." However, it is more of an indictment of our society that a children's book must be engaged to preach the obvious — an act which does not automatically enoble the instructive vehicle, no matter how lavishly and mystically it is illustrated.

Ron Lightbourn's art (for his work undoubtedly rises to this level) displays a beautiful use of light, colour, reflection and masterly tonal control. Yet Lightbourn's people are so exact, almost too close to mechanical renderings of a carefully-staged photo shoot. Their accuracy sadly pre-empts the artistic interpretation Lightbourn so obviously demonstrated in his exquisitely composed *How Smudge Came* (Red Deer P, 1995). Editorial decisions at Doubleday may have dictated the strangely weak front cover (especially when compared to the potentially stronger back cover) and there are disturbing echoes of Ewokland in the treatment of the *Driftwood Cove* forests. It appears as if the artist has traded his earlier quasi-primitivism and film-noir perspectives for the photographic reproduction of self-consciously atmospheric reality. The style leaves an unwelcome hint: a Disneyfication of the dream-catcher crowd? — a grim prospect.

Meanwhile, on the east coast in *Fog Cat*, we have a story appealing to any animal (especially cat) lover. Made without sentimentality, it has plenty of the plain, honest sweetness you'd find in a cosied teapot on a chrome-edged kitchen table. The slightly misguided publicity from Kids Can Press suggests the theme as an "if you love it, let it go" type, an unfortunate interpretation using formula schlock that simply does not exist here. Rather, the lesson lies in what animals can teach us, if we pay attention.

The story explains the adoption of Hannah and her grandfather by a semi-feral cat. Practical events unfold in an endearing tale of how lives interweave. While Marilyn Helmer's verbal restraint allows the reader ponder-

ing room, Paul Mombourquette's visions lovingly capture the weather-filled look and feel of an east-coast environment. God remains in Helmer's elegant details of word ("raspy, rusty voice") and Mombourquette's thoughtful images (the aluminum door hinge, among many others).

Grandfather reminds me of some chronically unsung character actor, familiar and comfortable. Hannah is slightly less successful as she suffers from the illustrator's toughest challenge — consistency. She may also be based on a real person, but her facial features and head size lapse erratically into adult proportions peculiar on her supposedly eight- to ten-year-old figure. Had the artist chosen a model who aged beyond her role before the book's completion? Technical problems aside, Hannah's uniqueness pleases.

The cat's articulation is remarkable, although its texture tends too often to look gooey and claylike instead of full-bodied, which layered line strokes would produce. Throughout, Mombourquette's beautifully evocative colour and tone, carefully used angles and luminescent light enrich *Fog Cat's* reverberations. Watch and note, the artist and author seem to say together: the dramatis personae in our next hour of crisis may feature a four-footed furry one.

Epilogue: it appears the *Driftwood Cove* creators, the Lightbourns, have quit the forested BC coasts for the Annapolis region and so we may yet see the peculiar eastern magic of *Fog Cat* inspire even greater books of beauty and mystery.

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*Robin Baird Lewis, an established children's book illustrator (Red is Best, et al), inoculates herself regularly with heavy doses of P.G. Wodehouse and Hunter S. Thompson.*

### "Thus Grew the Tale of Wonderland ..."

... Thus slowly, one by one,  
Its quaint events were hammered out —  
And now the tale is done,  
And home we steer, a merry crew  
Beneath the setting sun."

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

***On Tumbledown Hill.*** Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Dušan Petričić. Northern Lights/Red Deer College P, 1999. 30 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-186-1.

On the cover, colourful, anarchic, paint-splash children tumble across the black tabula rasa of the background. Are these the monsters mentioned on the book jacket? If so, this is going to be a fun book.