

A NATIVITY THIEF

A Thief among Statues. Donn Kushner. Illus. N.R. Jackson. Annick Press, 1993. 72 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-289-0.

Donn Kushner's *A Thief among Statues* has the clear tone of a carol or folk-tale sung in a minor key. From the suggestion at the beginning that "probably no one who is alive today ... knows the *real* story of the statues" (1), we are drawn into the tale of Brian Newgate, a young thief, who spends Christmas Eve in Merchantville's church. When two carved wooden statues from a dismantled Nativity scene come to life and tell Brian the story of their creation, he becomes involved in the scheme to reunite the rest of the members of the crèche.

Kushner's language is rich in symbolism: for instance, the avaricious people of Merchantville approve of their minister's sermon on giving charity only to the "deserving poor" and not forgiving "petty theft" (11-12). In contrast, the truck driver named Nestor—the Greek word for wisdom—is portrayed as having an instinctive grasp of the true meaning of charity. The strength of characterization, though uneven in places, is best realized with the Christ-like Jabez Lignum, the statues' creator: a skilled carpenter who died in the basement of the church, he returns as a ghost and beggar on Christmas Eve "[t]o freeze the hearts of folk who refuse him" (41). Lignum (the Latin word for wood) is a "shaper" (23), whose real work is putting the living spirit into wood. Another success is Joseph (modelled on the town's Darwinian school-master), who comments: "I think I've actually seen one insect species evolve from another" (54). In addition, Kushner weaves a feeling of mysticism through the tale, which appears most powerfully when Brian watches Mr. Lignum working with wood that resembles "living material, almost like flesh, that a really skilled worker could turn into any shape he wished" (68-69).

Kushner suggests that it is substance, rather than appearance, that matters, and that earthly prosperity does not signify spiritual goodness. The reversal of moral assumptions, evident in both Lignum's choice of models for the statues and the irony of Brian being a "good" thief, supports this theme. In the end, Brian is allowed to become "one of us" rather than remaining a stranger (45)—although the reader must decide whether or not this is his choice. N.R. Jackson's excellent wood engravings complement Kushner's tale, and illustrate Brian's progression from his life as an outsider to his eventual participation in Merchantville's Nativity scene. Like Donn Kushner's other tales, *A Thief among Statues* is intriguing and well-written; it also reveals deeper layers of meaning with every reading.

Anne Hiebert Alton has submitted her doctoral dissertation, which focuses on women and teaching in the novels of the Brontës, at the University of Toronto. She has published on Dickens and on Children's Literature.