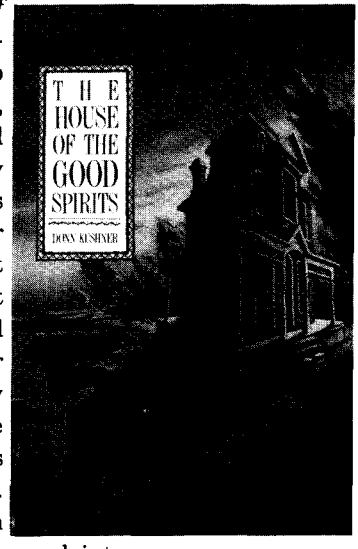
Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

A CHALLENGE TO READERS AND TO RACISTS

The house of the good spirits. Donn Kushner. Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990. 214 pp., $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88619-288-9.



Early in Donn Kushner's book, *The house of the good spirits*, the eleven year-old protagonist wonders "Why does everybody want to teach me things?" His mother consoles him, "It's because you're such a good listener," and adds "But you have to learn some things by yourself." These words describe the book's structure (Amos both listens, and finds out for himself), but the question – really a complaint – is also a possible criticism of any book that deals explicitly with issues of broad moral and social significance. In this new book Kushner takes up the theme of human rights previously explored in *A book dragon* (winner of the I.O.D.E. Book Award – National Chapter), this time focussing directly upon racial prejudice. And fortunately, he handles the issue with enough subtlety and complexity to allay most complaints.

The risk of preaching on such a theme is great; indeed, hardly avoidable, one might think. But Kushner does avoid heavy-handed didacticism without sacrificing moral content, first of all by the creation of an admirable and likeable protagonist. Amos Okoro, an eleven-year-old Nigerian boy, comes with his great aunt Naomi to spend a year in a small town near Kingston, Ontario while his parents, medical doctors, study at the nearby hospital. As Amos attends the local school and meets the townspeople, he encounters a variety of racist attitudes, from the well-meant slurs of Mr. Bidcup ("It's like a little jungle....You'll be right at home here," he comments genially on the neglected garden of Amos's new home), to the deliberate hostility of some of his new schoolmates. The range, variety and penetrating analysis of racist attitudes Kushner gives us is impressive. Children and adults display the whole gamut, from the unthinking to the brutally intentional: a boy who at first sees in Amos

the stereotypical black athlete concludes "Well, I guess *some* of you aren't such good ball players;" a teacher deliberately provides the other children with a theme for harrassment when he calls Amos's parents "witch doctors;" a child remarks, perhaps innocently, that he knows why Amos is not afraid of ghosts: "Because he's used to spooks already. That's what my dad calls blacks: spooks. He says in some streets in Toronto you can't see anything else."

Kushner's choice of the black child's point of view for his story risks the alienation of the white reader, but this does not happen. Children, whether racially stigmatized or not, are often the victims of prejudice, teasing and threats; Amos, who is intelligent and clever, fearful and courageous by turns, is an empathetic guide through these experiences. His understanding, and ours, is furthered by the reflections of Aunt Naomi whose cultural sophistication, disguised beneath her native dress, makes her the obvious superior of Amos's tormentors. We sympathize with Amos also because the ignorance of some (by no means all) of the "whites" in the story is made to look ludicrously funny, or just plain pitiable. Naomi "teaches" unobtrusively and entertainingly by means of African legends, and her wisdom merges with that of the clever tortoise who becomes Amos's emblem and guide into his fantasy adventure.

The first half of the book moves slowly and somewhat confusingly: there is not much action, and we are introduced to numerous characters who are hard to remember. But after Amos enters a fantasy world through the door of a reputedly haunted house, the book becomes a compelling read. Kushner is a master of surrealistic invention. Here he draws together themes of black slavery and its history in the United States, the adventures of slaves escaping to Canada, and finally the terrors of the Nigerian civil wars of this century, to which Amos has his own family connections. Far from escapism, this fantasy is a sometimes terrifying transformation of the real world in such a way as to illuminate its true significance: a television set is morally empowered to show a series on black slavery; Lake Ontario becomes the setting for an odyssey through the islands of temptation; the local inhabitants of Port Jordan introduced earlier in the book are reincarnated as types of good and evil, leading us to an understanding of the history of slavery.

The thread that holds all these together is Kushner's awareness that fear is the central cause of racism, and that racism exists everywhere, including among competing black peoples. Amos's courage in the schoolyard is given its true significance when he performs an act of great bravery in the fantasy world. But Kushner does not fob us off with soft psychological explanations either: in his two schoolyard bullies, reincarnated as adults in various stages of the fantasy odyssey, he presents the profound wickedness that underlies racial discrimination.

No one could criticize Donn Kushner's writing for patronizing young read-

ers; more than most, his books demand thoughtful and informed reading. But the rewards are rich for those willing to pursue them.

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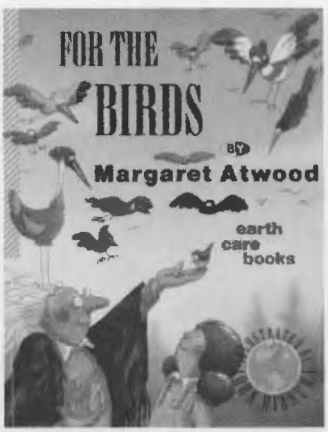
A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

For the birds. Margaret Atwood. Douglas and McIntyre, 1990. 54 pp. $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88894-825-5.



In the year 1786, writing as one of the group of writer-educators now referred to as the Sunday Schools Moralists, Mrs Sarah Trimmer produced her best known work for children under the title of *Fabulous histories, designed for the instruction of children, respecting their treatment of animals*. In this quintessentially evangelical book, which came to be widely known as *The history of the Robins*, Mrs Trimmer proselytizes for religion, obedience and the Christian family through comparisons between a human family and a family of Robins. The two human children who appear as primary beneficiaries in this edifying fable are indoctrinated in the late eighteenth century concern for matters spiritual. While Mrs. Trimmer's purposes are clear enough, so too, alas, is the palpable urgency of that purpose. How many young readers would, because of its blatancy, resist, Trimmer's pleading, is, of course, a question of some importance.

For late eighteenth century, read late twentieth; for spiritual indoctrination, read environmental concerns, and, for Mrs. Trimmer, read Ms Atwood. Margaret Atwood's *For the birds*, interestingly enough, reverts to a metaphor similar to that used by Mrs. Trimmer some two hundred years earlier as she reveals her particular theme primarily through the perspective of birds. But while Margaret Atwood's dedication to her theme is no less urgent than is Sarah Trimmer's to hers, Atwood's formidable arsenal of writing skills renders her proselytizing engaging, convincing, and ultimately, enjoyable.

Samantha, the book's heroine, friendless and plagued by the cheerlessness of a new home in a big city, carelessly throws a stone at a beautiful red cardi-