FROM THE PEDLAR'S BASKET

The singing basket. Retold by Kit Pearson. Illus. Ann Blades. Groundwood, 1990. 32 pp., $13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-104-5; **Mei Ming and the dragon's daughter**. Retold by Lydia Bailey. Illus. Martin Springett. Scholastic, 1990. 32 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-73370-2.

The pedlars who went about the villages in past centuries often carried among their more perishable wares some cheaply-printed folk tales and ballad sheets, thus circulating and preserving many traditional tales, poems and legends. The two tales under review here, while certainly not cheaply-printed, have the best qualities of folk tradition – strong, simple plots, some vivid details, and a satisfying resolution. One is a Quebecois version of a European folk tale, while the other comes from China.

The story of *The singing basket* has been told in many versions; Kit Pearson's picture book is a delightful adaptation of it for younger readers. The text is spare and straightforward, with an emphasis on dialogue and action, and Ann Blades' water colours are evocative of a chilly Quebec winter. The story is a *fabliau* about a crisis in a marriage, provoked and resolved by trickery. Finette pretends to have a terrible toothache, which can only be cured by fine French wine, so her husband Jacques undertakes the two day journey to town to fetch the wine; en route he meets a pedlar who persuades Jacques to climb into his large wicker basket and be carried back, unseen, to his home. When Finette lets in the pedlar, with his basket, there sits the greedy local seigneur, enjoying Finette's home cooking (roast partridge, smoked eels, jellied pigs' feet and turnips) and singing in a raspy voice:

> Jacques has gone to fetch us some wine,
> What a foolish fellow!
> *Finette's roast partridge is sublime,*
> Oh, my, I'm feeling mellow!

The basket suddenly breaks into song – an indignant one – and opens to reveal Jacques, who drives the seigneur away. Kit Pearson provides a positive resolution to the tale: "Jacques and Finette had a long talk. From then on they took better care of each other and lived the rest of their days in peace and contentment."

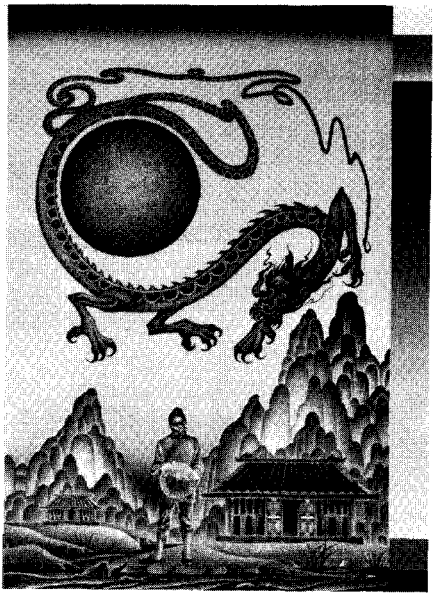
The visits of the seigneur, which an older reader might ascribe to other motives, are accounted for here by his gourmandise, and Pearson adds a few comical touches of the seigneur, burping and banging his mug; Ann Blades' pictures, too, which originally illustrated another retelling of this story, emphasize the joking quality rather than the intense emotions which might be evoked by the situation (the stuff of many a literary and real-life tragedy). While many folk tales have elements of magic or romance to attract children,

this one is altogether earthy, expressing the Gallic countryman's delight in ingenuity and one-upmanship. The songs, which I find fit nicely to the tune of "Pop goes the weasel," give the story a particular colour and humour, while gentle indications of real affection between the woodcutter and his wife mitigate the potential harshness and convince us of the "peace and contentment" promised at the end.

Song is again the means of revealing character and motives and of resolving a problem in Lydia Bailey's *Mei Ming and the dragon's daughter*. Unlike the earthy humour of *The singing basket*, however, the tone of this story is serious; it concerns the magical powers of the human voice to calm monsters and provide for human needs. Mei Ming is modest about her singing:

> Fish have fins and birds have wings.
> I've one small voice
> But I can sing.

When her village is parched by drought, and she finds a hidden lake which could relieve the villagers, this "small voice" proves to have a powerful magic. By singing she attracts the dragon's daughter, who joins her in singing to sleep the old dragon and thus liberating the waters he guards. The dragon's daughter returns with Mei Ming to live in the river that now flows through the village, and "each evening at sunset the people of the village could hear them sing their songs together, their voices joined as one in joy and friendship." The gift of song in this story is like the gift of water: a deep human need which is to be shared with other people, and an unfailing source of pleasure.



Mei Ming and the dragon's daughter is a satisfying story about courage and generosity, and it has been quite well told. What is likely to strike the reader most vividly, however, are the brilliantly-coloured illustrations by Martin Springett. He uses rich reds and deep blue-greens to suggest a traditional Chinese setting and the scroll-like designs and steep-sided, round-topped mountain forms often found in Chinese art. While evoking tradition, however, the effect of the art is original; portraits of the characters are stylized but emotionally expressive, and the forces and moods of nature are vividly conveyed – for example, by the harsh talons of the sun dragon during the drought. The design of the book and arrangement of the illustra-

tions are particularly attractive; Springett uses roundels, decorative borders, double-page pictures with inset text, and varying perspectives to fascinate the reader and draw us deeper into the world of the old story.

Gwyneth Evans *has taught English at several Canadian universities, and now teaches Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Children's Literature at Malaspina College on Vancouver Island.*

MERE ILLUSTRATION: A NEW *RUMPELSTILTSKIN*

Rumpelstiltskin. Dorothy Joan Harris. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Oxford University Press, 1991. 33 pp., $16.95. ISBN 0-19-540766-0.

Rumpelstiltskin made one of its early appearances in Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1575). Since then, numerous versions of the tale have appeared throughout the world, with the creature answering to such names as Tom-Tit-Tot, Whippity-Stourie, Trillevip, and Kinkach Martinko. The best known account occurs in the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, and Harris models her version on theirs. Despite Bruno Bettelheim's belief that fairy tales should appear unillustrated, Regolo Ricci makes an admirable attempt to render in pictures the highlights of Harris's story.

While Harris is a well-established writer of picture books, adolescent novels, and magazine articles, *Rumpelstiltskin* is her first attempt at making an old tale seem new. Harris modifies the story by replacing the old, avaricious king with a wise, young modest one. In addition, Harris names her heroine Elinore (the Greek word for light), thus giving her more identity than a typical fairy tale character. Furthermore, Harris's tale is didactic: the Miller's discovery of Rumpelstiltskin's true name and his subsequent redemption from avarice add a certain freshness to the traditional story. The only weakness of the text appears at the end: extending the story past the last scene (between the Queen and the little man) appears superfluous.

Rumpelstiltskin is Regolo Ricci's fourth picture book and second fairy tale (see *The tinderbox* 1990). One must admire his courage in following a tradition established by such renowned illustrators as George Cruikshank, Walter Crane, Mervyn Peake, Paul Galdone and Paul Zelinsky. Moreover, Ricci's con-