

Deux Illustratrices Québécoises

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The Miraculous Hind, Elizabeth Cleaver. Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973. 64 pp. \$8.95 cloth. Also available as *La Biche Miraculeuse*, tr. Irene Aubrey.

Les Perles de Pluie, Lucienne Fontannaz. Texte de Éric Mérimat. Le Tamanoir, 1975. 27 pp. \$4.95 papier.

Speaking of her craft in *CCL#4*, Elizabeth Cleaver said: "Artistically valuable books will educate the child's taste and visual sense. They will stimulate imagination . . . Through picture books we can help develop visual literacy."¹ Her own picture book *The Miraculous Hind* and Lucienne Fantannaz' *Les Perles de Pluie* are excellent examples to support this thesis. Both books succeed to a very large extent in presenting illustrations that are suitable and exciting for children and, at the same time, are uncompromisingly good art by any standard.

Elizabeth Cleaver's *The Miraculous Hind* began as a response to a request from the National Film Board in 1971 for a story for a children's filmstrip on Canada's various ethnic groups. The legend she chose for the film was a folk epic of the migration that led to the settling of what is now Hungary, and the artwork was based on research into historical Hungarian costume, design motifs and decoration. The published book, which is probably most suitable for the 6 to 12 age group, won the Canadian Library Association award as Book of the Year for Children in 1973.²

The story is of two princes and their hundred horsemen who pursue but finally lose a magic hind, gaining instead royal and fairy brides for all and the land of Hungary forever. This episodic but potentially dramatic tale of high adventure and romance is, unfortunately, retold in a somewhat pedestrian manner.

Elizabeth Cleaver is, however, a far better artist than writer. Every page is a blaze of colour, brilliant wash and collage backgrounds on which are imposed plants, animals and people in collage and linoleum block. Detail from the last three hundred years of Hungarian culture (not from the obscure historical period concerned, 400-800 AD) is visually stimulating. The accompanying illustration, for instance, shows not only the collage and block technique, but also the imprint of real lace in the woman's costume.³ The seventeenth century originals of the floral tiles were only recently excavated in Hungary.



The cut-out and linoleum block figures, mostly in stark black and white, give an effect of primitive or child-like art, of intentionally non-naturalistic humans dominating a more realistic world. The composition of the pictures is imaginative, full of contrast of line, shape, texture and colour. But they could be better disciplined. This is the more surprising as Elizabeth Cleaver is known for her powerful illustrations for other writers (e.g., *The Wind Has Wings*, *The Witch of the North*); it seems that the weakness of her own story-telling here has led to an art that is diffuse rather than dramatic.

At moments of decision in the story, the printed text is replaced by cut-out words "so that children should feel and see that there is beauty in the sound and look of words When the cut-out words cannot do justice any more to the ideas in them, at that moment they become pictures themselves. Words become images—the two become one."⁴ Apart from the fact that the letters are very hard to read, and were consequently disliked by the children we tested the book on, this theory is only valid when meaning and symbol unite, and here they do not. Furthermore, it totally ignores the symbolic and imagistic value of type itself. Lead block can be as powerful as linoleum block. In fact, Ms Cleaver could have been better served by her book designers. The printed text is often obscured by dark backgrounds, layout is undistinguished, and the pictures should probably be within borders to avoid the effect of similar colours running unrelated scenes together.

The Miraculous Hind is nevertheless a better book than the above criticisms suggest. Though not totally successful, it is such an ambitious conception as to have much greater value than more modest successes. The motifs from folk art are beautiful and the composite "Hungarianess" is visually and intellectually satisfying. But best of all is the sense of observing an artist experimenting with the artistic

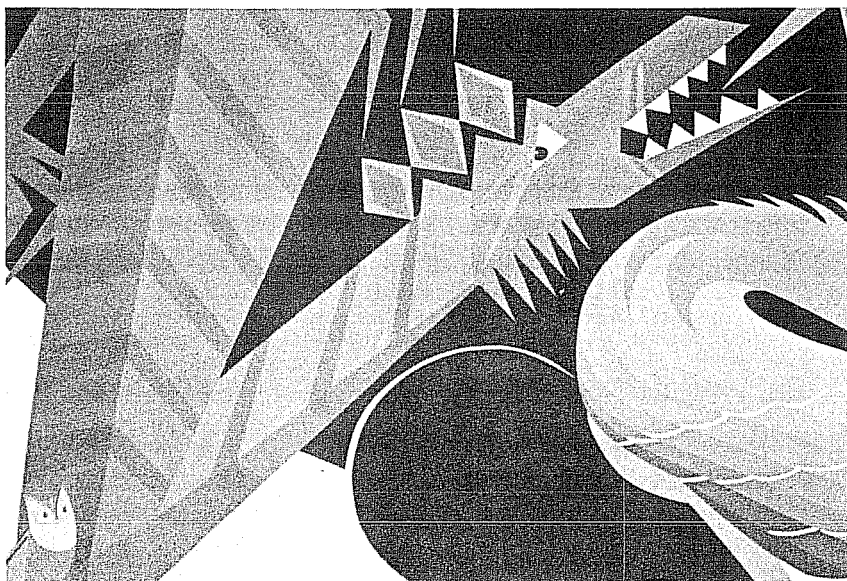
process.

Les Perles de Pluie (The Rain Pearls) is so far only available in French, but the sooner it is translated into English the better. It is a story book rather than a picture book, but the text can scarcely be separated from the illustrations without doing damage to both. Many of Lucienne Fontannaz' pictures make sense only in context, but at the same time they expand the story's feeling of luminous other-worldliness.

The story, by Éric Mérimat, concerns a slightly stupid but likeable cat looking for magic pearls of rain. On the way he meets thieving lizards, a mocking donkey, storm dragons, a ticklish whale, and a delicate, dancing starfish. The quest leads not to fame and fortune but to love and happiness, though quite un sentimentally, thanks to the author's gentle irony and to a twist on the traditional fairy-tale ending: the intrepid seeker chooses enchantment for himself rather than rescuing his beloved to "real" life.

The pictures are staggeringly original art, and as fantastical as the story they illustrate. The style has a distant ancestor in a soft post-Cubism and there are elements of today's graphic art and of Canadian native art, but the result on the page is unique—two-dimensional shapes, blocked in with extraordinarily subtle unshaded colour. The concept, as the cover of this issue of *CCL* shows, with the cat observing three lizards carrying rain pearls, is simple; the result is superbly sophisticated and above all beautiful.

Movement is held on the page in the tension between colour and form; themes, from the story, of earth, air and water are matched in the predominantly brown, blue and green illustrations. You can tell the character of an animal from its picture: the mocking donkey is as ugly as Picasso's *Guernica* horse, the lightning is an atypically angular dragon (illustrated below), the wind is another dragon, both sinuous and



bloated, the starfish a ballerina on point. The wit in the pictures matches the wit in the story, for the magic pearls make ugly things beautiful, and old things young, but they also put butter on biscuits and sugar in jam. The storm monsters scream in Aristophanic onomatopoeia. And the lizards steal rain pearls so they can turn themselves into crocodiles, but that, as the author says in prim Kiplingese, is another story. Yet one is drawn back to the pictures again and again; they are deceptively simple and surprisingly detailed.

The book appeals to all ages from 2 up, but the reading level is probably best for 7-11 year olds. An anglophone 8-year-old of our acquaintance, after two years of French immersion, succeeded in reading and comprehending the story with help.

One small disappointment is the stapled format, done presumably to keep down costs. The book will be vulnerable to handling and assuredly any copy will be much handled. The lack of a spine may also prevent the book from being easily spotted on a library shelf, which would be an appalling waste of a superb book.

Les Perles de Pluie cannot be recommended too highly as an artistic and story-telling delight for both children and adults.

NOTES

¹ "The Visual Artist and the Creative Process in Picture Books", *CCL*, No. 4 (1976), p. 71.

² Ms Cleaver describes the genesis of the book in more detail in "The Visual Artist", p. 79. Dr. Veronika Gervers of the Royal Ontario Museum did much of the research, and her scholarly material is included as an end-piece to the book, explaining the ethnological significance of the legend. A slightly simplified version suitable for older children might have been a better choice.

³ See Cleaver, "The Visual Artist", pp. 76-77.

⁴ Cleaver, "The Visual Artist", p. 77.

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