

Canada's Ethnic Heritage

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The Flying Ship, transl. Victoria Symchych and Olga Vesey. Illust. Peter Kuch. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston of Canada, 1975. 93 pp. \$8.95 cloth.

One of the very few or perhaps the only published Canadian collection of Ukrainian folk tales appeared on the market this year. This collection of thirteen folk tales was gathered together by the Women's Council of the Ukrainian Canadian Committee, a body which has done much to preserve Ukrainian culture in Canada. Two noteworthy publications of theirs are *Ukrainica Canadiana*, a serial that is a bibliography of Ukrainian - Canadian literature, and a *Chronology of Ukrainian Canadian History* which came out in 1974.

Ukraine had an especially rich oral literature. There were seasonal, ritual songs, epic songs and poetry; there were also folklore and fairy tales. The Ukrainian tale, influenced by the isolated way of life of the Cossacks, shows the spontaneity and naive simplicity of the primitive folk tradition. Each country stamps its own personality on its folk tales, and in Ukrainian folk tales we find their own unique elements and characters-in *The Flying Ship* we see boubliks on a pear tree, cruel landlords and flying ships.

The folk art tradition of Ukraine rubbed shoulders with the art of folk satire. Subjected to social and national oppression, Ukrainians developed the gift of laughter-laughter at landlords, parasites of society, corrupt politicians and petty officials. Emigrating to Canada, Ukrainians found that folklore filled their need for self-expression. Work was hard and long, pleasures were few; laughter was used not just to satirize but as a relief as well. Thus the folk tale tradition was transplanted and adapted to the new environment. Ukrainian-Canadians re-told the stories they had heard as children, made changes and added new tales. The old tales entertained their children and carried the parents back spiritually to their homeland. Retelling old familiar folk tales from Ukraine also kindled a brotherly bond in their new land.

In the past thirty to forty years, as Ukrainian-Canadians became more literate in English, they seemed to be forgetting their homeland with its customs and rituals and especially its oral tradition. More recently, feeling the loss, especially for their children and succeeding generations, individuals and groups have been trying to collect and preserve a meaningful body of their folk art, including literature. Some research, compilation and publication of Ukrainian oral traditions in Canada has been done. One publication by V. Plavyuk is a collection of

proverbs; another collection was initiated in 1953 by J.B. Rudnyckyj, who collected all forms of Ukrainian-Canadian folklore on tape. These stories, legends, proverbs and songs were later translated and published in two editions--one in Ukrainian, the other in English. However, both of these works are more suitable for adults as a preservation of their culture. *The Flying Ship* is a needed and rare Canadian collection of folk tales for both parents and children to enjoy.

Certain problems arise in criticizing and evaluating translated folk tales of a nation. Because the tales are selected from a broad body of told and retold tales, they are not original works in the usual sense, but an adaptation of an original literature. This original oral literature has by its very nature strong elements of interest and imaginative appeal to children. With its symbolism, sense of wonder, and interpretation of life experiences, it immediately attracts the young reader. In the words of Meigs, "These are the qualities which a selector should represent in his selection and a reteller retain or recreate in his adaptation."¹ While some changes or omissions may be necessary to obtain a readable flow, the original characteristics of imagination, symbolic truth and fitting expression should not be muddled or destroyed.

The Flying Ship succeeds well on this level. "Gossipy Paraska" tells us how a husband cured his wife Paraska of gossiping. His carefully planned and executed ploys worked, Paraska never gossiped again, and they were able to enjoy new-found wealth as well. "The Sled" briefly and humorously advises us not to discard the aged but to look after them. In "The Old Man's Daughter and the Old Woman's Daughter" we follow two daughters' experiences; one is hard-working and kind, the other is lazy, vain and selfish. "The Flying Ship" deals with three sons, two wise and one foolish. After a series of imaginative test trials, it is the foolish son who wins. Thus we see familiar folk tale themes with a tendency toward a moral idea, but ones that are written with fitting symbolism, humour, imagination and appeal. Each of the tales in this collection is thoroughly enjoyable, light-hearted reading for both children and adults.

A translator of folk tales for children has the problem of not only maintaining the qualities of the original, but of choosing words which read well and sound well when read aloud. Being of Ukrainian ancestry, I remember sitting around the kitchen table on the farm with my brothers and sisters, listening to my mother or father tell us Ukrainian folk tales. How enraptured as children we were! In this regard, too, Victoria Symchych and Olga Vesey have succeeded well.

There is one bothersome short-coming of the collection; understandably it is difficult or impossible to pinpoint the origin of told stories, but it would have been helpful and enlightening to know from where and how these folk tales were chosen--whether from Canadian-Ukrainians' memories, from old Ukrainian books brought over, directly from Ukraine, or a combination of these sources. Except for three tales which were translated from Ivan Franko, we are given no indication of the source or the manner in which these folk tales were collected.

Peter Kuch, as the illustrator, is to be highly commended. Each tale has an illustration--the longer ones have a water-colour picture as

well as a black and white drawing, the short ones just a black and white drawing. In both the black and white line drawings and the full-page colour illustrations, Kuch has provided enough detail and vividness to carry one off on an imaginative trip; he has also captured a Ukrainian flavour in the book. People are depicted as Ukrainians not only in features, but in detail of dress and surroundings. In "Strange Feet" we see a startled gentleman at the base of a gnarled tree stump with traditional Ukrainian attire and no shoes. In "The Linden Tree and the Greedy Old Woman", the greedy woman stands dressed in a baboushka and embroidered skirt and apron in front of a thatched house, ordering her husband about. In many cases, the black and white drawings are more effective than the water colours. The cover design, done in a colourful, woven pattern, is artfully produced, and identifies the book as Ukrainian or Slavic in nature. However, the appeal of the cover seems to be more to parents than to children.

It is not surprising to learn that *The Flying Ship* has won the 1975 Graphic Arts Award in the Printing Industries of America competition which included both American and Canadian entries. It will not be surprising if the book wins other awards as well, in the future.

What audience is this book aimed at? Tests on several children of varied ages and literary tastes indicated that the book has most appeal to children in the early primary grades. Reactions here varied from "good" to "really good". The type is large enough to be easily read by this age group. Older pre-school children should enjoy being read any of the tales.

Is *The Flying Ship* worth buying at its rather hefty price? Yes, definitely. I think the book is well done and would be a welcome and refreshing addition to any child's library.

NOTES

¹ Meigs, et al. *A Critical History of Children's Literature*. (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

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