

Two Modern Faërie Lands

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King Orville and the Bullfrogs, Kathleen Abell. Illustrated by Errol Le Cain. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1974. Cloth.

The Magician's Trap, Eileen Piper. Illustrated by Alan Daniel. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Scholastic-Tab Publications, 1976. \$1.30 paper.

J. R. R. Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories" remarks that it is dangerous for the traveller in the realm of *faërie* "to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost". Taking this warning to heart I embarked upon a cautious exploration of two modern fairy tales, *King Orville and the Bullfrogs* by Kathleen Abell, and *The Magician's Trap* by Eileen Piper. I found to my relief, however, that the denizens of modern fairy tales, while garbed in the traditional trappings of that land where all stories begin "Once upon a time" and end "happy ever after" are less anonymous than their predecessors. There is room for humour and idiosyncrasy as well as magic and the supernatural in the telling of the story.

While both narratives fall into the category of *märchen*, by being tales about characters in vaguely located lands, where the supernatural coexists with the real, and where everything ends happily, *The Magician's Trap* conforms much more closely to this tradition than *King Orville and the Bullfrogs* does.

The good King Justin has a beautiful kingdom stretching from the mountains to the sea which is the envy of the wicked magician Duke Rollo who rules a rocky island close to King Justin's shores. Duke Rollo plots the downfall of this land by using to advantage the king's only sorrow, his over-adventurous son "Harold the Daring". The object of Harold's quest, suggested by the Duke on a neighbourly visit, is a magic pearl at the bottom of the Sargasso Sea, which, if brought to land, can grant one wish. However, the guardian of the pearl, a fearsome octopus who is the magician duke in disguise, has the power to transform anyone who fears him into a sea creature.

The events that follow, the brave prince's departure, his failure to return and the king's subsequent ban on fishing, and finally his offer of half his kingdom and twelve barrels of gold to the man who can gain

the pearl, are described from the point of view of Elsa, a blind girl. Through the eyes of a turtle, who later becomes Elsa's guide, we see the three heroes, a strong knight, a brave lion tamer and a crafty thief, who set out one at a time to seek the pearl and their fortunes. All three fail, and Elsa, as she can neither see nor fear the octopus, undertakes the quest, not for gold but because of the grief of the king, and for the safety of the kingdom. She accomplishes her task; the turtle turns out to be the prince; and the thief, upon being disenchanting, is found to have another magic pearl which gives Elsa a pair of perfect eyes. A royal wedding ensues, while the magician, caught in his own trap, stews inside the giant oyster even to this day, thus completing the sudden "joyous turn" of events characteristic of the fairy tale.

The story is told with the economy of language one expects to find in folk literature (one could quibble and ask for a tone that is a little more poetic). However, gone are the nameless first, second and third sons who traditionally seek their fortunes, the anonymous king and the beautiful heroine, replaced by characters who are real individuals, including an effective female protagonist. There is humour in the fates of the three brave men and in the description of their return to normality. Yet despite the detail and characterization, Eileen Piper's first published children's story loses none of its excitement or wonder.

The beautiful illustrations by Alan Daniel show a real feeling for the content of the book. In soft watercolours, they flow with the story, changing perspective and shape. Several double page combinations of picture and type are most effective. Variety has been achieved without cutting up the story or cluttering the pages. Like all good illustrations for fairy tales they suggest as much as they give, and never do they jar the reader into a too-real world. This book was on the selection list for the CACL award for the best illustrated Canadian children's book of 1976. Alan Daniel's previous work seems to be focused mainly on horses, including *Dan Patch* and *A Horse for Running Buffalo*. His work in fairy tales is so attractive that it is hoped that more will follow.

The paperback format and lower quality paper is in keeping with Scholastic's philosophy of getting the books into the hands of the children rather than into those of their parents, but it is a disappointment to those of us who would like to see the illustrations more effectively reproduced. While Scholastic sells some books only through its reading club programme in the schools, *The Magician's Trap* is on its retail list. A sixty page book, with easy-to-read print, it would be enjoyed by any child who likes fairy tales, particularly eight and nine-year-olds.

A very different but no less delightful book is *King Orville and the*

Bullfrogs, by Kathleen Abel. Against a backdrop of traditional fairy tale motifs, long ago and far away, castles on mountain tops, kings, queens, beautiful princesses and handsome princes, and of course, haunted woods and wicked enchantments, Abell creates a far from traditional fairy tale, more akin to Andersen than to Grimm in its exposure of human foibles, but different from most folk literature because of its gently satiric, tongue-in-cheek tone.

The kingdom of King Orville is peaceful and poetically described, the one discordant note being the king himself, who unlike his literary predecessors, refuses to be either faceless or nameless. A noisy early riser, he loves contests, particularly when winning. The queen, Rosemary, and the three princesses, Flora, Dora and Cora have their own interests including flower arranging and harp playing. It is around the results of the princesses' music and the king's love of contests that the story centres. This sweet music is wafted across many valleys to the similarly idiosyncratic kingdom of King Francis (a vague romantic poet) and his Queen Pamela (a rotund doting mother). Their three sons Horace, Boris and Maurice, expert bagpipe players all, ride off to investigate. Everybody falls in love to the harmonious sounds of harp-bagpipe melodies. However, at the pre-nuptial feast, Queen Pamela precipitates the crisis, a bagpipe contest which the king unfortunately loses. She is banished to the dungeons, and her sons to the haunted forest for twenty-five years.

The second part of the book deals with the efforts of Horace, Boris and Maurice to persuade the king to withdraw his punishments. Changed into giant bullfrogs, they serenade the king night after night despite his humorous but ineffectual efforts to prevent their gleeful burbling and barbling. Finally the king, convinced that he can't have his own way, gives in, and the frog princes are admitted to the castle. Kisses from the princesses break the enchantment, Queen Pamela is released from the dungeon, and, amid much celebration, the royal weddings take place.

Unlike many fairy tales, which throw the reader immediately into the action, give only the facts relevant to the story, and conclude swiftly, Abell's tale, and we the readers have a wonderful time along the way, with language, characterization and description. The "joyful turn" of events has to be badgered out of the king over a good many pages. Because the story is born out of literature, not out of oral tradition, there is room for detail and humour.

It is this detail and humour that have inspired the illustrations for this picture storybook, done by the well known English artist Errol Le Cain. Le Cain, like all good illustrators, is adept at changing his style to suit his subject matter. In the past, and since the publication of *King*

Orville, he has illustrated many more traditional fairy tales, including *Cinderella*, *The Child in the Bamboo Grove*, and *The White Cat*. His drawings, usually quite delicate, have become more robust and rollicking to suit the tone of Abell's story. Illustrations and print are well integrated, with interesting variety evident in page layouts. His scenes of hustle and bustle are a delight in their detail and variety of facial expression and goings on, and surely never have three more convivial frog princes graced the pages of a fairy tale.

Children who have already been introduced to fairy tales will particularly enjoy the satire in the story setting and motifs, and although a younger child would understand its message about getting your own way, the tale might be rather long for very young readers.

Sheila Egoff in the *Republic of Childhood* and elsewhere speaks about the dearth of imaginative Canadian literature which she attributes to our ancestors having left behind the world of "Once upon a time . . . in favour of a brave new world. These tales are not folklore in the true sense (our folklore properly speaking is that of our native peoples) yet both draw on universal fairy tale motifs. *The Magician's Trap* with its emphasis on the supernatural and its more conventional fairy tale plot and tone is the more traditional of the two tales, yet both reflect their modern origins in their depth of characterization and use of humour.

Both *King Orville* and *The Magician's Trap* are indeed welcome additions to our available stock of folk and fairy tales.