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Two Types of Fantasy

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The Houseless Mouse, Ray Logie. Illus. by Catharine MacKenzie. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 32 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Bee Who Never Slept, Ray Logie. Illus. by Catharine MacKenzie. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 32 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Adventures of Prince Paul, Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. by Jane Wolsak. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 31 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Finding Princess, Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. by Jane Wolsak. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 31 pp. $1.69 paper.

"Fantasy" is used today to cover many kinds of stories: stories of imaginary creatures in this world, of imaginary worlds, of humanized animals, of animated toys or objects, of fable and folktale. The four books reviewed here belong to two of these categories: two are animal fantasies, and two are what I shall call, to distinguish them from traditional folktales, "folktale-fantasies." All are picture-storybooks, with a relatively brief text and black-and-white illustrations.

The plots of the two animal fantasies are simple. In *The Houseless Mouse*, Melvyn the mouse goes through many difficulties finding a place to stay, and when he has found one – in a house for people – he is scared away by a near-disaster with a mousetrap. At the end of the story he is still looking for a home, and the narrator appeals to the reader to help him find one. In *The Bee Who Never Slept*, Peter Pollen is a normal bee, except for the fact that he can't sleep through the winter, like other bees. He conceives the great idea of spending the winter selling used beeswax, but he cannot get customers. So he decides to give the wax away, "And that is how you get wax in your ears. Peter Pollen, who never sleeps, put it in."

These simple plots are given life by the author's language. He can use it

with verve and economy, as in the opening sentences of the two books: "Once, not in a house, there lived a mouse" and "Once upon a petal there lived a bee." He also likes to play with words, in a way that is amusing to many children, as when he introduces the bee:

> His name was Peter. Peter Pollen for long. Well, for almost as long as he could remember anyway.

Also, since the two stories are told by a narrator, they have a verbal pacing that encourages reading aloud (however much violence it may do to standard punctuation), as in:

> Melvyn always carried a portable sign. To nail up on places he stayed. Because Melvyn, when he was not between places, was always staying somewhere.

and

> But Peter Pollen didn't. Go to sleep like the other bees, that is. Snuggle down with his furry Teddy Bee, in other words.

Thus although Logie's stories may be read silently, I believe they are best read aloud by a reader who can enter into their fun.

But the same use of a narrator that makes these good oral stories apparently makes the author forget he is telling a story about animals. For example, in the story of the mouse, Logie at times loses the mouse's point of view entirely, as when he has Melvyn leave his home in a barn because the "cheese-makers" below (cows) are too slow in their production of cheese. A human would know the relationship between cows and cheese, but would a mouse – even an anthropomorphized one? In other words, is the motivation for abandoning the barn believable? I think not. Another flaw in the narrator's role is the occasional descent into archness. In spite of such problems, though, I believe children can enjoy Logie's two stories, especially when they are read aloud.

To me, however, the best aspect of these two books is the illustrations by Catharine MacKenzie. Her drawings do not simply illustrate the text, they expand it, giving the reader an imaginative picture of Melvyn's attitudes and surroundings which permits the text to be simple enough for younger children. These pictures include the kind of detail that intrigues children: the collection of articles, such as broken scissors and a discarded tea canister, in one of Melvyn's homes; the positions and bedding of various hibernating bees. Thus although the texts may lack consistency of viewpoint, the illustrations help counteract this flaw.

The two books by Alderson suggest that consistency is even more difficult to achieve in the folktale-fantasy. Their plots are traditional – a need, three events, and a resolution. In *The Adventures of Prince Paul*, the hero is given three gifts: an ivory staff, a tall hat with a feather, and a golden yo-yo, and sets out to look for adventure. He falls into a pit, but manages to

escape with help from his staff and an obliging eagle. He falls into a lake but rides to shore on the back of a friendly turtle, rowing with his hat. He entices a young dragon out of his path with the yo-yo. At home again, he retains the friendship of the three animals.

In *The Finding Princess*, the unnamed princess is sad, in spite of all her parents and grandparents can do for her. She asks for, and receives, a pear cup, a silver ring, embroidered dancing shoes, and a finely-made singing bird. But these do not make her happy, so she sets out to find what she wants. She finds the equivalents in a seashell, a ring around the moon dancing barefoot in the grass, and a live bird to whom she gives her last cookie-crumbs. She returns home, happy, and takes her parents and grandparents to experience what she has found.

These summaries alone suggest why this form is more difficult to write than animal fantasy: it makes use of a traditional plot, which may easily become trite; it is easily overloaded with moral; and, most important, it involves a problem of distancing. In her two stories, Ms. Anderson has tried to overcome triteness and, in *Princess*, overmoralizing, by the inclusion of modern elements: Paul's yo-yo and the Princess's food for her journey which consists of "some peanut-butter-and-macaroni sandwiches, some licorice, some pickles and some chocolate-chip cookies". But these devices are not enough. The author is not able, for example, to give *Prince Paul* a convincing ending: "And once a year forever after in Prince Paul's country everyone celebrated Adventure Day in honor of Paul's three adventures." But why should his people celebrate his private achievement? And *The Finding Princess* is spoiled by a heroine who acts like the good little girl in a 19th-century moral tale. She finds her shell "after a good deal of looking," and then gives it away, thinking "I can always find another." The incident would have been sentimental if it had reflected the real difficulty in the giving.

But the biggest flaw in these two books is caused by the problem of distancing, because this involves both the author and the illustrator. In animal fantasy, the setting may be indeterminate, but in stories about humans – and especially a prince and a princess – the action needs some time and place. The traditional solution is to set the action of folktale "long ago and far away," but this must be consistent. In Ms. Alderson's stories the prince and princess are traditional; the yo-yo and chocolate chip cookie are not. This inconsistency has its uses, and I think it can be solved, as, for example, by brief indication that the countries of the prince and princess are not like ours. But in the two books under review, it is not solved, so the contain no believable worlds.

As I have suggested, this problem affects the illustrator as well. In *Prince*

Paul, for example, there is a porch that looks like that of a late Victorian house, a hat that looks like part of an illustration for "The Pied Piper," and a prince wearing what appears to be jeans. And in *The Finding Princess*, the princess is dressed in 1930's style, her mother and grandmother look like medieval ladies, and her father and grandfather wear medieval clothes and modern haircuts. Surely some image of a more consistent world could have been devised, even with the difficulties in the text.

Sheila Egoff, in *The Republic of Childhood,* says of the world projected in a fantasy that

> Its conditions are as practical and as consistent as our own. It begins with its own unique set of premises, but within this framework it follows the dictates of sequence and causality.[1]

The four books reviewed here, I think, fall short of this criterion of consistency in various ways, so that none may be called a first-rate fantasy. But I find the two by Ray Logie and Catharine MacKenzie more lively, and hence more likely to catch interest (especially because of their illustrations), than the two by Sue Ann Alderson and Jane Wolsak.

Notes

[1](Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 69.

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