

shadowy monster-guests in the Killer Whale house, and the deceitfully alluring presences of the House of Pestilence, where a kindly hero is beautified and a nasty young woman is crippled, are all persuasively described. They come across as authentic age-old fancies and nightmares. And in the strictly human scenes, manners and mores are conveyed with satisfying precision. Harris's tone can dip into coyness, and I think she overdoes repetition, even if it is faithful to ancient storytelling technique, but her style is normally brisk and connotative, and she doesn't pull her punches.

With such narrative skills and her special knowledge of Indian history and lore, Christie Harris might now do well to tell us some stories unhaunted by her special narnauk. If I were Mouse Woman, that's what I would advise.

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## The "Other World" Revisited

VERNA REID

*The City Beyond the Gates*, N. Roy Clifton. Illus. by Tibor Kovalick. Scholastic-TAB, 1977. 118 pp. \$1.05 paper.

This first novel by N. Roy Clifton is a fantasy written for children following the conventional mold, but with a new twist. Mr. Clifton uses the structural apparatus of traditional fantasies, but combines this with an allegorical dramatization of the pernicious effects of modern technology. The title of the novel is an accurate indication of its contents. The story opens with its young heroine, Janey-Ann, peering through a tree-trunk fence at a strange, barren land, which is dominated in the distance by a high, white, city tower. Janey-Ann yearns to transform the ugliness of the

strange land. As the yearning grows, gates mysteriously open up in the heavy bulk of the fence, so that the city beyond the gate becomes accessible, and beckons to be explored. The gates unaccountably close again, but the reader knows by the end of the first chapter, that he is to follow Janey-Ann through those gates to an adventure in the distant city.

In this opening and in the subsequent development of the plot, the author has exploited the sure-fire devices characteristic of traditional fantasies for children. The most powerful of these devices is the notion of the Other World, a mysterious region which co-exists, yet contrasts with the familiar reality of the everyday world. Lewis Carroll called his Other World "Wonderland" and had Alice discover it at the bottom of a rabbit hole. The British children in C.S. Lewis's books found Narnia at the back of a wardrobe, while American Dorothy gets blown to Oz by the wind from a Kansas tornado. The children in these and other well-known fantasies live out for their readers the almost instinctive conviction that there exist mysterious realms beyond the humdrum world waiting to be explored if one only knew how. Perhaps these Other Worlds of children's literature are simply metaphors for the exploration of the self, or literary extensions of the individual's dream world. Whatever the symbolic explanation, however, the enduring success of stories which employ this kind of split-level vision indicates that a basic imaginative need is being met. One might label this as the need to experience magic, to find evidence of the supernatural.

There are other characteristics typical of the traditional fantasy for children. For example, access to the Other World is for the select few; the children concerned gain entry either through accidental discovery, or through mastery of the correct entrance formula. Similarly, return to home territory is only conditionally available; one must remember the way back and fulfill the rules of return. Within the Other World, there is usually a headquarters, presided over by the ruler of that land. To accomplish one's goal, one must enter the headquarters and negotiate with, or vanquish, the ruler. There is also a kindly resident who befriends the newcomer, and a wise benefactor who dispenses advice on the rules and regulations. This Other World is often a place of beauty and of strange delights but it is also a dangerous place, and the threat of never being able to return home is ever-present.

Within the conventions of traditional fantasy Canadian writer Roy Clinton operates, but he does so in his own way. Janey-Ann lives in Tree-Land, a pastoral paradise which I found reminiscent of the Utopia pictured by the Pre-Raphaelite writer William Morris in *News from Nowhere* (1891). There is the same emphasis on the goodness of a life lived close to nature, on the wholesomeness of natural unprocessed food, of the beauty of artifacts made by hand out of natural materials, and on the responsibilities of communal living. These are the values embraced also by present-day movements such as the Whole Earth society of the 1960's and 1970's. Living in bountiful peace, full of a sense of well-being, Janey-Ann becomes aware

of a neighbouring land in which there are no trees and where the soil is sterile and the streams muddy. Wanting to bring some of this bounty to the damaged environment on the other side of the Fence, she is allowed, through the urgency of her desire, to find the Gates and pass through. She is befriended by Ambion, the Green Boy, and with his help she comes to understand the conditions of life for the citizens of Fair-Look, the city of the white tower. Theirs is almost totally an artificial life dominated by unnaturally stimulated desires for the machine-made products of a mass production society. Clifton pictures a consumer society gone berserk in which the citizens are held in bondage by the power of their own appetites. The Stranger, the wise benefactor in this story, is the only resident not held in this bondage, and he explains to Janey-Ann that his freedom has its source in not wishing for any of the products that the consumer society has to offer. Janey-Ann continues to explore Fair-Look to learn its rules and regulations, and enters finally the heart of the city, the white tower, which is called Government House. There she observes the fully-automated machines in action, observes the futility of the so-called "work" and obtains an interview both with the powerful Kemarch, and with the Giant, the ultimate ruler. These two make it clear that they are able to control the citizens only because the citizens accede to that control, through their demands for the products of the machines. They barter away their freedom to satisfy their appetites. Janey-Ann wants to free Green Boy and take him back to Tree-Land. The rest of the story details Green Boy's victory over his desires and their joint escape from the machines, the cement, the plastic clothes and ersatz food of Fair-Look through the Gates to the verdant beauty and wholesome life on the other side of the Fence.

The existence of an Other World, the image of the tower, the roles of the various characters in Fair-Look, the attempts of Janey-Ann to understand the strange place, and the final dash for freedom and home are traditional elements of fantasy. What is not traditional is the perception of the Other World as presented by Clifton. Usually, the reader leaves the familiar everyday world, to enter a new dimension. Clifton however, employs a reversal. His Other World is not a place of magic enchantment, where animals talk or where spells are cast, but our everyday, contemporary world with its advanced computerized technology, its mass production and planned obsolescence, its chemically produced food and clothes and its threat of wholesale pollution of the landscape. Clifton is doing for children what Orwell did for adults in his novel *1984*, taking present trends in modern society to their logical conclusion. The only magic in the book occurs where the two worlds meet at the Fence, when the trees seem to whisper the secret of a safe return to the fearful little girl. It is Janey-Ann's everyday world that is an enchanted place, simply because it is Utopian in its peace, productivity and sense of well-being.

Clifton's book is one which I think children in Grades 4-6 would find interesting and rewarding. The author's use of the Other World convention

does not in this case allow use of the great resources of magical happenings because he prefers to direct the story toward social comment on present day society. The point of view he presents, however, with its emphasis on preserving the ecology, and the benefits of living in harmony with the natural world is one for which young people feel a great deal of sympathy. Moreover the descriptions of the natural beauty of Tree-Land tends to offset the harsh ugliness of Fair-Look.

*The City Beyond the Gates* was somewhat marred for me by two things. First, I was puzzled and irritated, unfairly perhaps, by the occasional use of British spelling (“waggon” for “wagon” for example) and of somewhat archaic terms (fence “pales”) in a novel published in Canada, presumably for Canadian school children. More serious however, were the occasional lapses in style. Quite often I found myself tangled up in subordinate clauses, or in imprecise descriptions of physical layouts, trying to visualize what was going on. I even found myself reading short sentences over two or three times, wondering if I understood them. Try for instance “The road kept on over the ditch by a bridge” (p. 111). Apart from these reservations, however, I can recommend *The City Beyond the Gates* as a traditional fantasy, given a contemporary twist. The illustrations by Tibor Kovalik add charm to it, and a touch of magic.

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## Wanted: Good Editor for Children's Books

SUSAN BECKMANN

*The Big Yellow Frog*, David Carefoot. Illus. by Vladyana Krykorka. Three Trees Press, 1978. 24 pp. \$2.95 paper.

*The Baby Streetcar*, Helen Huyk. Illus. by Kathryn De Vas Miller. Three Trees Press, 1978. 24 pp. \$2.95 paper.