

grandparents. Literature “makes over” the past – makes it vivid and meaningful by imaginative renewal. Second, the book brings a suffusion of sympathy. Again and again, students who read *The Stone Angel* comment, “That was the first time I ever realized what it’s like to be old.” Younger children, too, need a book that stirs them to tenderness and admiration for older people.

A still deeper perception is offered also. Through play, children accommodate themselves to the realities of death as well as of life. In winter, a favorite Canadian game is to lie in the snow, slowly making angel wings – playing at death and resurrection perhaps. Sal, at the outset of this book, decides not to play that familiar game. But she finds an alternative way to cope with the cold facts of winter, of death, of being far from home. She puts on the warm coat of fiction, of imagined identification.

From *The Olden Days Coat*, any reader, child or adult, can gain the double gift of fantasy: momentary entry into a world outside direct and daily experience, and enriched awareness of the ordinary mortal world. Trailing clouds of imaginative glory we return refreshed in a sense of the mystery and strangeness of “real” life.

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The Twelve Dancing Princesses

CLAIRE ENGLAND

The Twelve Dancing Princesses: A Fairy Story Re-told, Janet Lunn. Illus. by Laszlo Gal. Methuen, 1979. 27 pp. \$10.95 cloth.

A handful of books produced in Canada are world class. This is one, a tribute to the collaboration of author, artist, editor, and publisher. Such picture-story books may be reviewed by considering text and illustration as a unit and by comparing them with other editions of the same story.

First a word about transmission of text. Lunn retells a version from the French about a poor lad who, aided by magic gifts, solves the mystery of shoes that nightly get worn through. The shoes belong to twelve princesses who secretly slip away to dance with twelve princes in an underground palace. As reward, this gardener's boy marries the youngest princess and inherits the kingdom.

It has been truly remarked that *contes de fées* after Perreault are "perfumed, powdered and prolix". French versions are literary creations, synthesizing elements and explaining actions but also embroidering extra bits. Lunn excises some French prolixity but expands other areas in keeping with her re-creation. For example, she presents the three warnings in rhyme. The French version differs from the much more familiar, more frequently found German version collected by the Brothers Grimm. Lunn's literary version appears to be based on the French with German incursions.

Certain elements have bothered all re-shapers of the story. To begin with, there is the acceptability of the protagonist to a young audience. The German version features a wounded soldier, too old and useless to continue a military life. He solves the riddle and asks to marry the eldest princess, a lady of rather scornful temperament. Some author/artists (Le Cain) intuitively or unconsciously falsify their text by showing the tattered, short, old soldier as younger, taller, thinner and entirely more prince-like on his wedding day. The French, more romantic than the Germans, preferred (as Lunn does) to feature a handsome young man who claims the beautiful youngest princess.

Second, in times conscious of violence in fairy tales, there is the question of death as penalty for failure to solve the riddle. Traditionally French versions have not chosen death for the penalty. Unsuccessful candidates disappear, or may even be added to the ghostly collection of dancing partners. Death, usually by beheading, occurs in the German, and it occurs in Lunn. Lunn probably reflects an opinion that fairy-tale deaths do not adversely affect children. She makes the statement and passes on to more important plot development.

Third, there is the unexplained intervention of an old woman who provides the magic gift(s) that enable the hero to gain his kingdom. Lunn, like other retellers, has the hero perform a kind deed for which he is repaid. Lunn largely but not completely, dismisses the French embroidery about dreams and the golden-haired visions who act as 'fairy godmother'.

A fourth niggle arises from considering too closely the character of the princesses as revealed in various versions. These girls could be read as sly pusses, haughty types, or as nice but muddled. The oldest and the youngest are not totally likeable, while the ten between are sheep-like spacers. Lunn gives the youngest a gentle if obstinate nature, perfectly captured in the illustration where the youngest speaks with her father. Lunn also gives the

girl the gumption to act at the last minute to change an unfortunate circumstance into a desired and happy outcome.

Finally, there is the peripheral but nonetheless implicit question of what happened to the princes who danced the night away. Most German versions have the princes continue in their enchanted state (the princesses having failed as spell-breakers) for a number of days equal to the number of nights the princesses danced with them (the princesses' attempt at spell-breaking either didn't matter or else even actively added to another's punishment). Other versions release the princes to marry the princesses. In that case, there is one prince left over. Some versions do not explain, and Lunn does not. She concentrates on hero, heroine and happy ending.

To focus further a child's personal identification with the hero and heroine, Lunn drops the French device of naming people and place.

Laszlo Gal's illustrations help by conveying a sense of real people in a plausible world. His characters have solid bodies; they move and stand naturally. Gal's two daughters served as models for the two most important princesses – the oldest and the youngest. Scenery, castles and costume have either a medieval look or a look of the early 1600's. The princesses favour hats and collars appearing suspiciously like the Italian *punto in aria* lace that became a European vogue in the late sixteenth century.

The colourful pictures have delightful touches. As the princesses descend their secret staircase, both look out at the reader as if making personal contact. One of them is waving. As the princesses dance, with scarves billowing, a balcony orchestra plays on antique instruments.

This book is large, 29 x 22 cm., with two pages of type alternating with the full size double-page spread of pictures, seven in all. Editions from the sixties pale by comparison. Uri Shulevitz and Adrienne Adams both illustrated smaller editions with coloured cartoons that provided pleasant but insubstantial sketches on each page of type. Stiff competition comes from the 1978 edition done by Errol Le Cain. His habit of placing a lavishly detailed full page illustration opposite a block of text centred in an equally elaborated matching border is stunning. His fantasy fashions a fairyland. Published close in time, these two editions, one British and one Canadian, invite comparison on several counts. The editions are very different, but each is successful.

Laszlo Gal won the 1977-78 IODE award for his illustration of three children's books. This book continues and surpasses work recognized in that award. Janet Lunn won the 1979 IODE award for best children's book of the year. Accolades to Lunn and Gal for *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* are deserved.

Other choice illustrated editions of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* are:

- French: Adams, Adrienne. *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1966.
- German: Shuh, Elizabeth, translator. Illus. Uri Shulevitz. *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- British: Le Cain, Errol. *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.

Addendum: The CCL editors note that Laszlo Gal has just been selected as the joint recipient of this year's English Language Canada Council Children's Literature Award for his illustrations in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*.

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