

dictionary. Her latest article, "Computer simulations: activating content reading" appeared in the February '88 issue of the *Journal of Reading*.

MARCHING TO OBLIVION: NYBERG'S COCKROACH ARMY

Galahad Schwartz and the cockroach army. Morgan Nyberg. Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. 96 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-035-5.

Its title is comically intriguing. And *Galahad Schwartz and the cockroach army* begins in a light, promising fashion. Its setting seems to be a novel fantasy world containing the flying dinosaurs of Finland, the meatball trees of Mongolia, and the rare Giant Dactyls, small winged bears whose meat tastes like bubblegum. Unfortunately, none of these plays a role in the book. Instead, the book's action takes place in a conventional world unrelated to these imaginative wonders. Even more unfortunately, Nyberg's early manic inventions seem to exhaust his imagination. His fatigue appears in his disappointing plot, characterization, and theme.

The plot of *Galahad Schwartz* combines a comic version of Monica Hughes's *The tomorrow city* (1978), in which a computer eliminates "undesirables" in order to make a better city, and that hackneyed staple of science fiction, the effort to stop a callous megalomaniac from ruling the world. The enemy in Glitterville is Creetch, who, like the computer in the Hughes novel, is eliminating undesirables and old people. Creetch's motive in spraying them with a substance that makes them disappear is not clear. The only reason seems to be, quite simply, that this shows that he is nasty and that this provides a strong reason for the involvement of Galahad, who lives with his aged grandfather.

The plot also borrows from folklore and romance. At first, Galahad is the typical unlikely hero of folklore, and he gets important information in a typically folkloric way: he overhears it. Later, making an archetypal descent into a cave, he learns the secret of talking to animals. His teacher, a South American witch doctor, is the magician-helper of folklore. Galahad uses his knowledge to organize an army of insects and birds, thus defeating Creetch. Such animal helpers show, as they commonly do in folklore, that the hero is on the side of nature and that nature is benign. The device also sets out a contrast here between Creetch, an insect exterminator, and Galahad, a boy who believes that even cockroaches have a right to life.

Of course, Galahad, like his namesake, is physically active in the final encounter, but even as a parody of heroic battle, the last scene is anti-climatic. Galahad suddenly realizes that Creetch is a little man no bigger than he is

(one of the many symbols in the book) and takes away Creetch's spray can. As if this were not anti-climax enough, Galahad learns that the spray was only temporary and no longer works. In other words, time would have taken care of Creetch; Galahad's efforts are not necessary. So much for the deadly power of evil and the need for individual heroics!

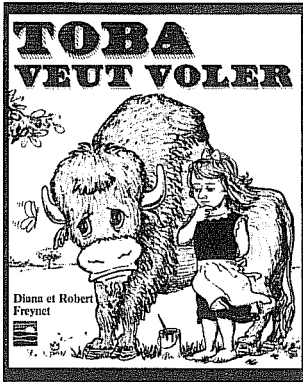
In spite of its defects, the plot is mostly unsatisfying because characterization is weak and theme negligible. The characters are a gallery of eccentrics, but none are especially amusing. Creetch, the villain, is purely conventional: he is a small ugly man with an ugly name. Most disappointingly, he is not even an evil genius because he discovered his spray by accident. It is little wonder that he quickly disappears in the climactic scene and the Angel, his conventionally gigantic and stupid henchman, provides the only genuine threat.

Obviously, the story is about good defeating evil, but the plot makes evil only temporary and, thus, inconsequential. More seriously, the inept use of symbolism makes this theme vague. That Nyberg attempts symbolism to create a significant theme is obvious. Sometimes he is even successful. For example, Galahad's grandfather lives in an apartment with only the number zero remaining on the door, a subtle foreshadowing of his status in a world run by Creetch. Sometimes Nyberg is partially successful. For example, he suggests that television makes people's eyes glaze over, but he fails to establish whether this is part of Creetch's evil plot to distract people, a symbol of the frightened grandfather's failure of perception, or a statement about modern life in general. At key points, Nyberg is pretentiously vague. The Glitterville library is a series of caves that Galahad explores. In the "Religion" cave, he hears the "heartbeat of the earth." Has Galahad here come into contact with mystical truth as opposed to the rational truths of Creetch's world? Does going into forbidden tunnels leading out of the "Religion" section symbolize truth beyond organized religion? Does this symbolize the plunge into the subconscious, as in many myths and fantasies? Do the tunnels have carvings resembling the tattoos on the witch doctor's back in order to suggest a return to knowledge and power missing in the modern world? Finally, by concentrating on the cockroaches, is Nyberg really trying to say that it is wrong to destroy any form of life, that no insect is really a pest? Nyberg is clever enough to plant symbols, but his book is too brief to make adequate use of them.

The selection of *Galahad Schwartz and the cockroach army* as winner of the Canada Council Prize for Children's Fiction has caused a lot of head shaking. It won over distinguished offerings by Welwyn Katz and Donn Kushner. Apparently, the judges were seduced by its superficial novelty. Novelty is, indeed, its one strong point. In all other respects, *Galahad Schwartz and the cockroach army* is mediocre. The books by Katz and Kushner are going to be around for a long time. Cockroaches may be able to survive nuclear attacks, but this cockroach army will march off into the dark night of oblivion, unmissed and unmourned.

Raymond E. Jones teaches in the English Department, University of Alberta, and is co-author of Canadian books for children: A guide to authors and illustrators (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

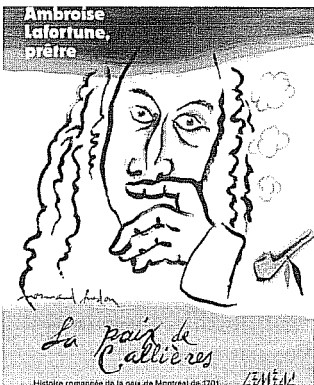
MINI-COMPTES RENDUS



Toba veut voler. Diana et Robert Freynet. Illus. Auteurs. Saint-Boniface, Éditions des Plaines, 1986. 40 pp. broché. 0,00\$ ISBN 0-920944-66-3.

L'album, qui vise un public essentiellement manitobain, relate l'histoire du bison Toba dont il est dit que l'emblème orne le drapeau du Manitoba. Trop lourd pour voler, le bison fait appel à l'imagination d'une jeune métisse pour enfin accéder au royaume symbolique et aérien du drapeau. Malheureusement, le récit qui mène à cette intéressante transformation est

peu original: histoire de petite fille insouciante errant dans la forêt. On se prend à regretter l'absence de caractérisation de la jeune métisse dont la seule motivation semble être de gambader en forêt et de suivre le premier venu à l'aventure. Que le bison Toba soit vide de sens réel, c'est normal, puisqu'il s'apprête à prendre un caractère purement emblématique. Mais Marie, la métisse, qu'advient-il d'elle, sinon qu'elle se sacrifie encore et toujours pour que l'autre accède au bonheur et à la sanction symbolique? S'agit-il d'envol ou d'usurpation dans le titre?



La paix de Callières. Histoire romancée de la paix de Montréal de 1701. Ambroise Lafortune. Illus. Normand Hudon. Montréal, Leméac, 1986. 139 pp. 14,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-7609-9856-8.

Ce récit historique soulève de sérieux doutes. Ambroise Lafortune y fait la narration des victoires et défaites de la colonie de Montréal sous le mandat du gouverneur de Callières de 1685 à 1701. Or, est-il possible de nos jours de