

ASKA'S ANIMALS AND CARRIER'S CANADA

Aska's animals. David Day. Illus. Warabé Aska. Doubleday, 1991. 32 pp., \$18.00 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25315-X; **Canada je t'aime/I love you.** Roch Carrier. Illus. Miyuki Tanobe. Tundra 1991. 72 pp., \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-253-0.

These handsome volumes have two main features in common: they were published the same year and they are experiments in bringing the visual and verbal arts together for readers young and old. Beyond this, however, the two works are remarkably different in style and orientation; they envision and create very different readers.

Canada je t'aime/I love you owes a great deal to the success of the painting-with-commentary books of William Kurelek. Tanobe's series of 22 paintings, depicting 16 Canadian cities, is accompanied by the quiet anecdotal humour so characteristic of Québécois novelist Roch Carrier. Carrier's texts, however, are not mere verbal itemizations of the canvasses; they are self-sufficient vignettes of his experiences of each city. The meetings of text and painting which the reader-viewer will find in this volume are, therefore, conceptual and metaphorical. For example, Carrier's cities are, first and foremost, walking cities; time after time he chooses to stroll (*flâner*) rather than view the city through the more common twentieth-century eyeglass of a car window. Although he pays tribute to recognizable landmarks of these cities, both historical and architectural, Carrier gives the individual anecdote pride of place; after relating the story of a Québécois transplanted in Saskatoon, Carrier concludes: "C'est pourtant de Bujold dont je me souviens le mieux" (effectively translated by Alan Brown as "But for me the tourist attraction was Bujold") (45). Similarly, in Tanobe's paintings, the automobile is virtually edged out by the human form; her canvasses are filled to bursting with chattering, smiling, playing people. For visual and verbal artist alike, the city is viewed in a human dimension.

What intrigues me about this book, however, is its political implications, in spite of the publisher's claim in the publicity materials that the volume is "non-political." The adult reader may conclude otherwise. In this book published the year after the demise of the Meech Lake accord, we have two Québécois artists (one by birth, the other by adoption) paying tribute to the cities of Canada, from St. John's to Yellowknife. In his foreword, Carrier chooses the word "privileged" (*privilegié*) to describe Canada; "Ces privilèges nous ont été donnés," he continues, "Pourquoi? Pour que nous les partageons, j'imagine" ("These privileges were given to us. Why? So that we could share them, I suppose") (5). Tanobe's visual message is no less conciliatory; her painting of *Préparatifs pour la Confédération (Canada Day preparations)* in Montreal features smiling Québécois draping strings of flags (three Canadian to one Québécois) on their apartment buildings. No St. Jean Baptiste Day festivities these.

The politics of *Aska's animals*, by contrast, are environmental, as are those of so many recent picture books for children. This volume is, much more than the Tanobe-Carrier volume, directed at the younger reader, particularly five- to ten-year-olds, I would say. But whereas Tanobe's paintings owe their style to German expressionism (Kirchner, particularly), Aska's artistic predecessors are the surrealists (Moreau, for example). As in his earlier books, *Seasons* (1990) and *Who goes to the park* (1984), nature is depicted as mythic; the clouds hovering over a group of racing rabbits are themselves shaped like running rabbits; patterns of various animals' skins are repeated in the natural textures of the forests and water which surround them. In political terms, the world is animate, an interconnected web of unsurpassed beauty and wonder. Here, the political message is powerful but also subtle, and its power derives largely from its subtlety.

The accompanying poems by David Day are more closely related to the paintings than are the Carrier sketches in *Canada je t'aime/I love you*. Day, a West-Coast writer who has, like Aska, a strong interest in fantasy, matches the paintings' mythic, surreal qualities in lines like the following: "For the moon was once the skylight door/Through which the first hares toppled./Each night they chase it, hoping to return home" (10). Though most of the text avoids privileging sectarian beliefs, one passage does sound rather heavy in Judeo-Christian connotations: elephants are described as watching "in wonder as the gates of heaven open"; "At the moment of creation," Day wonders, "could they have been/Anything less than trumpeting angels/With wide wings instead of those huge ears?" (20). In an otherwise inclusive volume, which crosses cultures and continents with great ease, these lines stand as an exception.

Aska's animals is a thoughtfully designed book. The first poem appears alone, on the right-hand page, before we see the first of Aska's paintings, and it whets the curiosity of the child reader:

Where did the animals come from?
What god or spirit shaped them?

It's a guessing game for you and me,
Imagining how the beasts began.(3)

The first painting, in which the foam of a wave metamorphoses into a row of rearing stallions, brings alive this very activity: "Imagining." This emphasis on the child's involvement continues throughout the books, to the last page and poem; the child is invited to step over the boundary of the book itself: "Imagining beginnings is a never-ending game," we hear, "These are just a few magical beasts./How many more can you name?" The environmentalist cast of this lovely volume, its vision of the planet as a delicate web, is replicated even in its shape and design; it is a book which has been spun, not compiled.

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