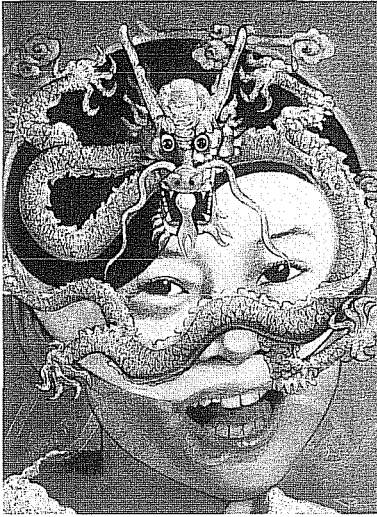


A BENEVOLENT DRAGON

The Dragon's Pearl. Julie Lawson. Illus. Paul Morin. Oxford University Press, 1992. Unpag., \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540843-8.



In Chinese mythology dragons were benevolent deities associated with water. As they were responsible for rainfalls essential to a good harvest, the basis of social prosperity and harmony, dragons were honoured and worshipped.

Julie Lawson's *The Dragon's Pearl* derives its inspiration from the dragons of Chinese mythology and relies upon metamorphosis for its narrative resonance. This is the story of Xiao Sheng, a good-natured boy who lived with his mother and "who loved to sing." Despite poverty and the back-breaking labour of cutting grass "to sell for fuel or fodder," Xiao Sheng evinces a child's innate optimism and curiosity about life. "Who knows," he comforts his

mother, "what the gods have in store for us? Today may not be the same as yesterday."

A devastating drought burns up the land, forcing Xiao Sheng to search the hills for grass. He finds a patch, cuts it, returns the next day only to see that the grass has grown back. He also discovers a pearl which his mother puts in an empty rice jar. According to the ancient stories, the dragon's pearl is magical as it has "the power to make things multiply." Generous in spirit and in action, Xiao Sheng and his mother share their bountiful supply of rice and gold with the famished villagers until thieves break into the house demanding the pearl.

A satisfying tale, *The Dragon's Pearl* is rich in archetypes: the self-sacrifice of the innocent for the greater good, the transformation of the human into the divine, in this instance a boy into a dragon, fire and water, earth and heaven, loss and reconciliation.

Lawson's writing on the whole is serviceable although she is prone to repetition, thereby lessening the impact of her prose; for example, the "jar was brimming with rice," and five lines later, "the box was brimful of gold." Imagery in this book can challenge logic. During the drought, "the river burned like fire along its scorched banks." In an effort to quench his extreme thirst, the result of swallowing the magic pearl to save it from the thieves, Xiao Sheng later drinks the same river dry.

The illustrator Paul Morin has visited China for the landscape of his pictures is recognizably Chinese. Although his luminous paintings are not precisely

detailed, the architecture, clothing, coins, etc. are true to the time and place and work well with Lawson's text. Often reminiscent of Vermeer, especially in their lighting effects and in their plentiful use of gold and yellow, Morin's art successfully conveys a sense of heat, wonder and "the faraway days of cloud-breathing dragons."

Kenneth Radu's most recent book is a collection of short stories, *Snow Over Judea* (*Véhicule*, 1994). He teaches English at John Abbott College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec.

TWO COLLECTIONS OF NATIVE STORIES

How We Saw the World. C.J. Taylor. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1993. 32 pp., \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-302-2; **Legends of Vancouver.** E. Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake. Illus. Laura Wee Lay Laq. Quarry Press, 1991. 141 pp., \$16.95, \$9.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55082-024-9, 1-55082-025-7.



Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake and C.J. Taylor, both of Mohawk descent, share the same goal of fostering understanding of Native cultures and Native worldviews. Their books, however, differ markedly in tone and style, and the differences reveal the extent to which, in eighty years, we have changed our way of writing about our First Nations.

In addition to four books of single tales (the most recent of which is *The Secret of the White Buffalo*), C.J. Taylor has written and illustrated *How We Saw the World*, her first collection. Of the nine stories in this collection, Taylor writes: "They try to explain the mysteries of nature

to us and I hope they will help you to see the world as we see it." Derived from nine First Nations from the Micmac to the Bella Coola, the stories are varied not only in source, but also in subject, mood and tone. They tell of the origins of Niagara Falls and the Pacific coast islands; of horses, butterflies, rabbits, and owls; and of tornadoes. They tell how dogs willingly die to help their human companions, how the first humans learn to cope with severe winters, and how