



Lessons From Ancient Burma

The Wise Washerman. Deborah Froese. Illus. Wang Kui. Hyperion Press, 1996. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895340-10-1.

This retelling of a traditional folktale from Burma highlights the value of hard work in a lighthearted way.

The washerman Aung Kyaing is renowned in his village for making dirty clothes "gleam like snowcapped mountains." The villagers think that he uses magic, but Aung Kyaing knows that hard work and perseverance get the clothes clean. His jealous neighbour, the less successful potter Narathu, plots against Aung Kyaing. Narathu visits the king, who longs to possess a white elephant, and convinces him to command Aung Kyaing to wash his grey elephant with his "magic" washwater. Aung Kyaing knows he cannot make a grey elephant white, but he will be banished if he refuses to obey the king. Instead, he devises a clever plan to save himself. He informs the king that he can only wash the elephant in a large clay vessel big enough to hold the animal and the warm soapy water. The only person who can make the vessel is the potter Narathu, who in turn cannot refuse the king's command. When the enormous vessel is finally ready, the elephant's weight cracks the clay dish and the water rushes out. Aung Kyaing explains that without a dish he cannot wash the elephant. The angry king banishes Narathu, and Aung Kyaing returns to his washtubs with more business than ever.

This satisfying story uses such classic elements of the traditional tale as the "impossible task" and the clever protagonist who saves himself by tricking his opponent. Froese's retelling is straightforward and lively, incorporating

plenty of dialogue and giving us the perspectives of both Aung Kyaing and Narathu. The author also hints at aspects of Thingyan, the Water Festival marking the Burmese New Year which is still celebrated today. A note at the end provides more information.

Wang Kui's vivid illustrations, with their energetic, swirling shapes and bright colours, are a perfect match for the text. Young readers will notice the numerous exotic birds that swoop and strut across the pages, and will particularly enjoy spotting the pair of fighting cocks that recurs throughout, perhaps symbolizing the enmity between Narathu and Aung Kyaing. Art and text together provide a taste of ancient Asia in an accessible form.

*Joanne Findon is the author of **The Dream of Aengus and Auld Lang Syne**, both illustrated by Tolkien artist Ted Nasmith, as well as several short stories for young adults. She holds a doctorate from the Medieval Institute at the University of Toronto, and she has taught both history and literature.*

Laughing between the Lines

Cold Night, Brittle Light. Richard Thompson. Illus. Henry Fernandes. Orca Books, 1994. 32 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-009-6. ***Bats about Baseball***. Jean Little and Claire Mackay. Illus. Kim LaFave. Penguin, 1995. 32 pp. \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-85270-8.

Cold Night, Brittle Light is a story in which a great deal happens; it is in fact seven stories framed by the main narrative. This complex structure, which moves between present events and flashbacks to past events, may prove confusing to younger readers. The text is also relatively long. Several of the mini-stories could have been expanded into books of their own. Despite this, the main narrative is compelling enough to make the structure work for older children. They will enjoy the zany humour of grandpa's outrageous tales about Canadian cold temperatures.

The story has a deliberately folksy feel and abounds in phrases such as "right full" and "darned if." Grandpa is a member of a traditional, extended family in which Mom bakes cookies, Dad works out, and Grandma knits. Cultural myths of wise elder storytellers, and of the "great white north," are invoked. This book should be a welcome addition in classrooms, to use with units on climate, to catalyse creative writing and oral narrative — or simply to share and laugh over.

Bats about Baseball, in contrast, is a story in which very little actually happens. Rather than a developed storyline, the book consists of puns and jokes shared between a grandmother and grandson. The book has a breezy, modern feel and the illustrator has risen admirably to the challenge of a story situated between an easy chair and a television set.

The authors have avoided gender stereotypes by casting an older female in the role of baseball fan. Her grandson seeks to distract her from the