

## Strong-minded Girls

*Brave Highland Heart*. Heather Kellerhals-Stewart. Illus. Werner Zimmermann. Toronto/New York: Stoddart Kids, 1999. 32 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-30990. *Little Kim's Doll*. Kim Yaroshevskaya. Illus. Luc Melanson. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1999. 24 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-353-6.

These two picture books are similar in that they both offer an intimate portrait of a family. By intimacy, I refer not only to the focus on a child's desire to have something and the parents' desire to raise their child responsibly and lovingly, but also to the visual representation of family.

The illustrators of both books depict the images of family in close-up, as a glance at the final page of each book will illustrate. However, a comparison of the final illustration in *Brave Highland Heart* with the cover of *Little Kim's Doll* will indicate the differing focus of each book: the first focuses on the relationship between a young girl and her father, whereas *Little Kim's Doll* deals mostly with the relationship between mother and daughter.

Perhaps even more insistent than the family theme is the depiction of a single-minded young girl stubborn to have her own way. The unnamed young narrator in Kellerhals-Stewart's story wants her family to accept her as an equal; she asserts her right to stay "up all night like everyone else." Kim, in the other story, expresses her desire for a doll and she cunningly rejects her mother's gift of a rifle. Both books end not only with the gratification of the girls' desires, but also with a vision of family (and, in the case of *Brave Highland Heart*, community) solidarity.

Another feature of both books is their particularity of setting. *Brave Highland Heart* takes place in Maritime Canada, probably Nova Scotia with its tradition of the ceilidh. The verbal text is spare, but the mention of tossed salads, baked pies, baked ham with pineapple, mustard pickles and such



Illustration from *Brave Highland Heart*

indicates a North American cuisine; the illustrations give us a distinctly North American house and barn and large kitchen. *Little Kim's Doll*, on the other hand, takes for its setting the city of Moscow during the Stalinist regime. The verbal text announces place: "the name of the country was Russia, the name of the city was Moscow." Illustrations depict Red Square, a window sign in the Cyrillic alphabet, a large statue of a heroic working couple carrying hammer and sickle, soldiers in Russian uniform and so on. Setting serves as a useful backdrop to stories about strong-minded girls, and it offers an opportunity for the young reader to begin to learn something about both history and culture.

In terms of verbal and visual style, the two books contrast. *Brave Highland Heart* uses first-person narration with a considerable amount of dialogue, and some nifty diction (words such as "beetled," "fetched," "acacia," "ceilidh"). Werner Zimmermann gives his watercolour illustrations vibrancy and texture. The drawing is realistic. *Little Kim's Doll* is more stylized, the drawing harkening back to a visual style we might associate with the 1930s and '40s. The pastel work is soft and warm, and the figures have the comforting quality of toys, despite a rigidity that reflects the strictures of life under Stalinist communism. In keeping with the stylized drawing is the poetic prose. Sentences are cleanly written and rhythmic.

The stories here are simple, even conservative. The girls hold out for what they want, but what they want is not really much of a challenge to normalcy. The one girl wants to participate in the ceilidh, and she does. The other wants a doll. What saves both books from assuming complete ideological comfort is the one girl's assertion that she deserves to be treated equally with her brothers, and Kim's pacifist preference for a doll over a rifle. We might read both books as challenges to complacency; conversely, we might read them as safe expressions of familiar family values manifested in less than familiar circumstances. (I am, of course, assuming a readership for *Brave Highland Heart* that lives beyond rural Nova Scotia.) Neither book strikes me as compellingly new or challenging, but they are attractive and well-intentioned.

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