

## All's Significant that Ends Significantly

*Lord of the Fries*. Tim Wynne-Jones. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1999. 198 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-274-2.

Tim Wynne-Jones's latest collection of short stories, *Lord of the Fries*, is well up to the standard one would expect from the award-winning author of *Some of the Kinder Planets* (1993) and *The Book of Changes* (1994). While his stories do not exactly fall within the category of magic realism, they do invest the real with a little magic, so that the wonders of ordinary life are opened up to both characters and readers. This latest collection is no exception, and the insights gained by those within its pages fuel the understanding of those perusing them. Wynne-Jones's deceptively simple prose uses ambiguity constructively and contains levels of meaning beneath the surface plot that are hinted at rather than spelled out. Particularly important are the very last words of each story, since they often curve back into ideas and images at the heart of the particular tale.

The majority of the stories in *Lord of the Fries* are set in small towns, rural communities, and cottage country. The characters are thus away from those invasive and demanding qualities of city life which are referred to as "the Shadow" in Wynne-Jones's novel, *The Maestro* (1995). Relationships are at the heart of Wynne-Jones's stories generally, and it is perhaps easier to imagine basic human interaction away from metropolitan distractions and pressures. His protagonists are varied, but most fall within a pre-teen or early-teen age range, so that they are on one side or the other of the threshold of adolescence. It is unsurprising that an imaginative writer would value imagination in his characters, and *Lord of the Fries*' protagonists are often would-be writers or enjoy a rich fantasy life. In "The Fallen Angel," for example, young Rodney transforms his twenty-minute snow-shoed trudge into town by imagining himself as a wilderness adventurer carrying vaccine to plague-stricken townfolk. Some of the stories are narrated in the first person but, even where there is a third-person narrator, as in "The Fallen Angel," Wynne-Jones invariably keeps the point of view close to the protagonist, usually focalizing the story through the character. This device enables him to present the story in ideas and images which accord with those of his young protagonist and thus he minimizes the distance between the text and the youthful reader.

The stories operate on more than one level. In the title story, the eponymous Lord of the Fries is a surly and scarred short-order cook whose mysterious past offers the narrator and her friend a chance to be investigative journalists and sell his story to a glossy People-like magazine. Playing with ideas of fairy tale — particularly Rumpelstiltskin with its notions of gold, trickery and spying — the story is, from one perspective, a quest for the "cold, hard truth." On another level, however, it asks important questions about intrusive tabloid journalism and the public's privacy-negating appetite for sensationalism and ersatz sentiment.

The stories are also about children who have some sort of vacuum in themselves and/or their lives. Inevitably their circumstances are ameliorated through connecting with others, greater self-knowledge, or improved self-esteem. In "The Bermuda Triangle" the title is both the name of a stamp and a metaphor for the loss of the protagonist's father and his own voice. Wynne-Jones's central characters are named Jim Hawkins and Billy Bones and the aged Bones has, suitably, buried

treasure on an island (a tin box on PEI). However, it is Jim who finally gets the equivalent of that treasure, obtained through both a relationship and his coming to terms with loss. In "The Pinhole Camera," the protagonist, Ford, who has no real friends, finds that the local landscape which he has re-mapped in his imagination has been re-imagined quite differently by another solitary boy. Resentment eventually metamorphoses into connection.

Wynne-Jones also tackles domestic and social problems in a novel way. "The Chinese Babies" (unusual in this set in that the protagonist/focalizer is more of an observer than a central figure) turns advice on playing chess into a metaphor for an appropriate attitude to life in a story that focuses on the dissolving of familial and racial solitudes. In "Ick," a goldfish disease becomes the unlikely inspiration for an antidote to sexual harassment.

However, what is particularly impressive about these stories is the power of their endings. Carmen, the Lucy Maud Montgomery enthusiast and budding writer who narrates "The Anne Rehearsals," notes the appropriateness of the story's Montgomery-like happy ending. The third-person narrator of "The Pinhole Camera" suggests a possible point to end that story but instead continues it for several pages to a more satisfactory conclusion. This importance of endings is reflected in each story's last words which connect the reader, often quite profoundly, with the central concerns of the particular tale. To discuss here in detail how these work would give too much away, but the conclusion of "The Fallen Angel" offers a fairly oblique example. The protagonist has had a possibly diabolical adversary in a story that takes place while a Stanley Cup hockey series between New Jersey and Detroit is being played. The winner of that series is revealed in the last line of the story. Wynne-Jones never refers to the losing team by franchise name — only by city — but that (unsaid) name nevertheless gives the last line a greatly added significance. And Wynne-Jones's stories are, without exception, loaded with significance, their meaning being particularly illuminated by their last words.

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### Jane Eyre in Martha Ostenso Country

*Runaway*. Norma Charles. Coteau, 1999. 181 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-143-7.

The rebellious young heroine in Norma Charles's *Runaway* will appeal to many juvenile readers. Marie Antoinette Sauv , or Toni for short, like most youths, struggles with the formal constraints that check her natural exuberance. Her resentment at being sent to a convent school and desire to be free finds its inverse parallel in Jess, an orphan whose "freedom" is forced upon her by the brutality of her uncle and guardian. During the course of the novel, Toni achieves an awareness of the need to balance freedom and responsibility without compromising her own spirited nature.