

A Potpourri of Fiction and Verse

What Will the Robin Do Then? Winter Tales. Jean Little. Viking/Penguin, 1998. 217 pp. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-88084-1.

For almost forty years, Jean Little has been a prolific, award-winning and much-loved author of books, chiefly novels, for the young. In engaging public readings and talks, she has enhanced her reputation, revealing something of the ordeals she has endured, particularly her loss of eyesight, and the distinctive mixture of Christian faith and an iconoclastic, imaginative sense of humour that have helped her through them. It therefore seems almost heretical to say that her recent collection of short stories and verse, *What Will the Robin Do Then?*, is less than consistently satisfying. But it is. As Little confides in the book's Preface, the eleven stories and 23 poems it contains were written over many years. Five items have been published previously, some in slightly different versions. The rest have been "piling up, unread, in a drawer," and she has "badly wanted them published." She has attempted some design by grouping them under months' names, September through March, and by "shifting" a few to new, wintry times. The seasonal references are, however, often faint. And there are inequities in style and degrees of artistic assurance, probably reflecting the different periods of composition.

Of the stories, by far the most accomplished and moving is the title one. A Christmas Eve that begins disastrously for its beleaguered but stouthearted protagonist ends in guarded hope. The deftly-sketched situation involves troubled, inept adults and deprived but resilient children. The only near-villainous elements are spuriously ho-hoing TV commercials and a wealthy tightwad dispensing perfunctory charity. The children are perhaps a tad too good to be true, but everything else is compelling.

In an entirely different way, "Freddy Frisbee Finds a Home" also scores. In this coolly-related modern fantasy, Freddy is drilled out of humane yearnings and into capitalistic conformity. The dehumanization is well underway when his automated house, itself rebelliously emotional, locks him out for his own good and makes itself cosy. If only the theme song were not "You are My Sunshine"!

The rest of the tales tend to begin with crowded explication and end with upbeat insights, happy coincidences, reformations, or triumphs of rational will that occur patly and quickly.

The verse is more varied. Little is an exuberant versifier and maker of striking images like "the tiny, blissful backs of toads" ("Rain"). Metrical verse dominates here, sometimes effectively used to underscore meaning. But sense outweighs scansion for Little, and several lines limp or stagger. Nevertheless, diverse themes and tones make most of the poems welcome constituents of this uneven but diverting potpourri of a book.

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