

plot is trying to move in both directions at once, and clarity of purpose is lost in this struggle. *The Forest Family* has many appealing features, but the unresolved struggle between traditional and modern themes will leave young readers confused.

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Orientalism for Children?

Sindbad: From the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights, Retold and Illus. Ludmila Zeman. Toronto: Tundra, 1999. Unpag. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-480-0.

Ludmila Zeman's stylish work as illustrator and teller of tales derived from ancient culture, most notably in her Governor General Award winning *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh* (last in a trilogy), is deservedly acclaimed. In addition to the beauty of her work as illustrator, in which she combines a virtuosic array of technical skills with a historicized sensitivity to cultural alterity, Zeman is a skilled and subtle teller of tales already told. In the case of *Gilgamesh*, based on Mesopotamian stories that are over 5000 years old and recounted on clay tablets, Zeman did not shy away from the sombre thematics that lend this story its particular melancholic lustre: the failed quest for immortality, seemingly self-oriented and narcissistic, spawned by fear of death, morphs into a compelling parable about civic and collective memory. When framed by Zeman's trademarks—bold colours, luminous images, imaginatively wrought chiaroscuro effects, baroque detail, and expressive figures—the results are stunning for all levels of reader. Though younger readers may have a hard time with the length, breadth and subject matter of the tales, the visual components carry their own narrative drive in ways that compel attention.

This strong narrative and visual drive is no less the case for Zeman's most recent book, which extracts one of the *Sindbad* stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*. Zeman deals nicely with the story-within-a-story dimension that links *The Arabian Nights* narrative excesses with the tangible struggle of the storyteller, Shahrazad, to survive her husband's practice of beheading new brides on a daily basis. The sexual voracity and deathlust of King Shahriyar are tamed by Shahrazad's storytelling abilities, rhetoric and consummate control of the narrative leading to the ethical subjugation and civilizing of Shahriyar, a thematic with obvious relations to Zeman's *Gilgamesh* cycle. The intricacy of Shahrazad's tales is given material and visual resonance when the king, enchanted by the stories and rid of his cruelty, orders "craftsmen to weave the stories into the finest colored silk carpets." The obvious feature of this transformation of the king is that one form of subjection gives way to another. Beheaded brides yield to elaborately patterned carpets that embed Shahrazad's narratives in aesthetically pleasing visual motifs "admired by people around the world" and made by the craftsmen so ordered. (One wonders if the craftsmen required to weave the tiny-knotted, silken patterns of the Oriental tapestries were not children themselves, thus lending an especially ironic context to the story of Shahrazad's survival, made



Illustration by Ludmila Zeman,
from *Sindbad*

manifest by the slavery of small hands and bodies, then retold for children by Zeman.)

The Orientalist motifs in the carpets are imaginatively reconstructed by Zeman in her border patterns (used from page to page), which mimic the effect of Shahrazad's and the king's transformation of story into visual emblem. But the king's ordering of his craftsmen to weave these magnificent talismans of his seduction by story is not necessarily a simple matter, implying different forms of domination and differential powers between king and subject. Moreover, Zeman reworks the story through visual cues that exemplify her wish to "recognize Persian influence in the art of book illustration, calligraphy, layout, illumination, and border decoration." Zeman adds that "This book, created in the style of Persian script, portrays the designs and feel of the magnificent Persian carpets. To replicate their concept, I studied Persian miniatures, Oriental carpets, illustrated manuscripts, and paintings of Islamic lands in museum exhibits in London, Paris, New York, and Berlin" (from the *Author's Note*). In short, *Sindbad* makes no bones about its Orientalist appropriations, a strategy that may be placed in relation to Edward Said's notion that "The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles" (*Orientalism* 2). The pertinent point is how these Orientalist discourses are used and produced, and the extent to which they replicate colonial practices even as they recognize their complicity with the differential power relations implicit in colonial and Orientalist structures. Said puts this question somewhat differently by suggesting that "If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowl-

edge, at any time" (*Orientalism* 328).

Zeman's narrative implicitly addresses this issue in a neat segue from her framing of Shahrazad's conquest of Shahriyar to Sindbad the Porter passing a rich old man, also named Sindbad, on the streets of Baghdad. Sindbad the Porter asks:

How dare this man, with the same name as mine, have such wealth and comfort all around? How much fairness can there be when a man like him never feels the heavy load and misery that lies upon me?

The question is overheard and leads to yet another nested tale, when Sindbad the Porter is invited into the old man's home to listen to his story of squandered, then recuperated, wealth, which forms the core of Zeman's book. The point to be made is that the book does not hesitate to acknowledge its indebtedness to Oriental narrative and visual cultures, nor does it hesitate to thematize differential power relations between the two Sindbads as if to allegorize its own relationship to the original story from *Arabian Nights*. Though most children will miss this larger point, the arbitrariness of fortune and the cruelty of subjection are important elements in the story that cannot easily be elided, especially for perceptive, young readers.

Some may argue that Zeman's work is a "seductive degradation of knowledge" because it does not take the extra step of acknowledging the material conditions of production that produced Persian tapestries, one of the central visual motifs in the book and a crucial aspect of the framed tale she tells. But for many children *Sindbad* will be a visually rich evocation of the Oriental other that is a far cry from the ethnocentric and moronic views of an Orientalist writer like Alexander William Kinglake, who argued that "the *Arabian Nights* is too lively and inventive a work to have been created by a 'mere Oriental, who, for creative purposes, is a thing dead and dry — a mental mummy'" (cited in Said, 193). Zeman's authorial note at the end of the book, indispensable for parents reading the book to their children and trying to contextualize the story, also addresses the linkages between first encounter, exploration narratives, and the Sindbad story: "Sindbad became an important historical figure because his travels were linked to actual voyages of the Arabs. Seven centuries before Columbus, the Arabs, who were remarkable sailors, mastered the route to China, seeking the riches of the Orient." Read in this light, Sindbad via Zeman presents a form of Orientalist writing in which familiar patterns (perhaps *too* familiar, *too* dependent on false analogy) of colonial exploration and encounter are backdrops to a validation of story and rhetoric over cruelty and subjection.

The question begged: *whose* story, *whose* cruelty?

Work Cited

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979

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