

beginning to be credited by serious scientists in the field. The setting is also very realistic for the time, and shows a very different landscape than what we know as Alberta and BC, including the gentle range of hills that would one day become the Rockies.

Overall, *Weet's Quest* is a fun read, based on good scholarship. It has some flaws, but none that seriously spoil this wonderful adventure set 65 million years ago.

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A Scientific *Jeu d'Esprit*

Life on Mars. Donn Kushner. Illus. D.J. Knight. Childe Thursday, 1998. 103 pp. \$14.50 paper. ISBN 0-920459-45-5. May be ordered through Childe Thursday, 29 Sussex Ave., Toronto ON M5S 1J6, (416) 979-2544.

A scientist and author of several children's books, Donn Kushner has produced in *Life on Mars* a novel that is simultaneously a scientific *jeu d'esprit*, a social satire, and an anthropological allegory.

As a scientific game, *Life on Mars* explains how the Viking Landers sent from Earth failed to detect life on the Red Planet. Extrapolating from scientific evidence about harsh conditions on Mars, Kushner describes a hardy, hand-sized, mushroom-shaped race of intelligent beings whose heads contain algae that photosynthesizes oxygen. Hosting parasites that eat all biological traces they leave on the soil, Martians managed to evade detection and its consequent problems by simply staying out of range of the lander's cameras.

As a satire, the novel presents Martian culture as an amusing distortion of Earth's. After receiving television signals from Earth for two hours, the Martians developed games that re-enact a news broadcast, a football game, a cowboy movie, and a commercial. Not understanding what they saw, however, the Martians made their games peaceful mathematical contests, thus implicitly criticizing Earth's pervasive violence. Individual Martians, who adopt the identities of figures from the television broadcasts, are also vehicles for social satire. For example, the Martian adopting the identity of Washington, the former slave in the cowboy movie, is honoured by the Martians, who considered Washington to be the most accomplished and important soldier. Similarly, Sister Sarah, inspired by the movie's missionary, satirizes religious zealots: against all reason, she insists that the lander contains the Martian ruler, a godlike being whom his subjects have heard but never seen.

The novel becomes an anthropological allegory touching on belief systems and cultural development through a plot twist makes it that staple of science fiction, the post-holocaust story. In this strand, *The Stranger*, a visitor from another Martian colony, represents the scientist who rejects blind faith to investigate artifacts and explain history. He discovers that the Martian myth of a Catastrophe (obviously paralleling Earth's flood myths) has an historical basis, that Mars was a green land inhabited by giants, and that the godlike voice directing Martians emanates from a computer that survived the destruction of the planet's atmosphere.

These pieces eventually fit together as well as the remnants of the original Martian civilization that *The Stranger* discovers, but the novel has weaknesses: it begins slowly; its addresses to the reader are awkward; the characters are too numerous to permit sufficient development; and the conclusion is anticlimactic. *Life on Mars* is not for everyone, but older readers will find in it both laughter and food for thought.

A Telling Adventure

The Story Box. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 1998. 166 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-648051-9.

As an indictment of intolerance, Monica Hughes's *The Story Box* is obviously a displaced version of the Salem witch trials. On the isolated island of Ariban, the elders forbid not only storytelling, as did seventeenth-century puritans, but implausibly, dreaming itself. Afraid that the young who hear tales of other lands will desert their homes, the elders do not allow strangers on the island. The citizens of Ariban thus follow a blinkered empiricism in which the only truth is that of the senses and the whole of life consists of "Birthing, growing, marrying, dying" (19). To such stark pragmatists, stories are lies, and dreams are sins.

The plot is predictable romantic fare, pitting a young boy, Colin, against his community. After Colin finds Jennifer, a storyteller, washed ashore during a storm, he sees that her stories enable his sister to control her nightmares and make him question his culture's values. Eventually, Colin must save Jennifer from execution and flee Ariban with her. Hughes deepens this plot by focusing on Colin's internal debate between loyalty to his traditions and his growing resentment of Ariban's intolerance. In doing so, Hughes refuses to make Colin stereotypically heroic: he is susceptible to prejudices, prone to self-serving lies, blind to consequences, but impulsively brave and ultimately noble.

Thematically, Hughes has only limited success in celebrating stories as a form of truth that is both therapeutic and inspirational. The ban on dreaming is so implausible that the emphasis on stories as a way of handling bad dreams carries little force. Furthermore, Jennifer's stories are not imaginatively gripping; they are pedestrian fairy tales that present thinly