

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

disguised versions of their listeners in order to offer advice. Finally, Jennifer, the advocate of imagination, appears primarily through the eyes of an uncomprehending Colin, so her ideas and character lack substance. In fact, Hughes conducts the argument against dictatorial empiricism not so much by making stories attractive as by making their opponents repulsive. Colin's betrothed, for example, is manipulative, scheming, and vengeful: repeatedly she implicitly threatens Colin by reminding him that her grandfather is a ruling elder. Hughes is even more heavy-handed with that grandfather, making him a callous patriarch who sneers at Jennifer's matrilineal culture, and a diabolical tyrant with cold, dry hands like those of a snake's skin and a voice that hisses the order for Colin to burn Jennifer's books.

The Story Box is an enjoyable adventure, but its failure to suggest that heroes can do more than run away from social injustice makes it a somewhat hollow attack on narrow-minded pragmatism.

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Dancing with the Past

Bone Dance. Martha Brooks. Douglas and McIntyre, 1997. 179 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-296-3.

The reader enters *Bone Dance* through two epigraphs provided by Martha Brooks. The first epigraph is a quotation from Chief Seattle's address to the president of the United States in 1855, and the second is taken from Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*. Brooks attempts to depict the spiritual power of the land of Manitoba in her novel, as anticipated by the quotation from Butala's book. In addition, she stresses the interconnectedness of the earth and its inhabitants, a concept highlighted in the words from Chief Seattle's address. The two quotations together suggest the connection of the land of the past with the land of the present.

The spiritual qualities of the landscape as depicted by Brooks are a little disappointing, particularly after hopes are raised by these epigraphs. Lonny, the young male character, is haunted by his childhood desecration of a burial site, which he associates with the subsequent death of his mother. Brooks conveys Lonny's pain and guilt for this irreverent event, and its supposed punishment, with the intensity and regret of the adolescent looking back at a thoughtless action. The reader is immediately sympathetic. Less successful, however, is the treatment of the manifestation of Lonny's guilt in the "damn spirits" that haunt him. In an attempt to avoid identifying or limiting the spirits in any way, the author treats them vaguely, thus remain-