

Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

PUBLISHING FOLKLORE

East of the Sun & West of the Moon. Reteller & Illus. Laszlo Gal. McClelland & Stewart, 1993. 40pp., \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-3301-X. **The King and the Tortoise.** Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. Kathy Blankley. Lester Publishing, 1993. 32pp., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-40-X. **Thistle Broth.** Richard Thompson. Illus. Henry Fernandes. Orca Book Publishers, 1992. 32pp., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-920501-85-0. **The Revenge of Ishtar.** Reteller & Illus. Ludmila Zeman. Tundra Books, 1993. 24pp., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-315-4. **Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails.** Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak. Illus. Vladyana Krykorka. Annick Press, 1993. 28 pp., \$15.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-339-0; ISBN 1-55037-338-2.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a remarkable and international proliferation of folklore books targeted at children and young adults. Of the many factors contributing to this trend, three are particularly important to the Canadian situation. First, the venerable tradition (dating from the English translations of the Brothers Grimm) of transforming the oral tradition into print for children simply continues and, with the expansion of children's book publishing, it can only be expected that more folklore works will appear. This connection of folklore with children reflects, however, a persistent if subconscious association of oral traditions with the childhood of this culture, that is, with the nostalgic past, perceived as simpler and better and therefore a positive—some argue necessary—influence on today's endangered youth. That folklore might operate now in most Canadian's lives is simply not understood. Second, for many people today, folklore is equated with ethnicity; hence, in a country such as Canada where the politics of culture has (at least since 1971) dictated a multicultural focus, children's books necessarily reflect this brand of political correctness. Third, the growth of a storytelling industry, with professional tellers, conferences, manuals and the like, has fostered a certain interest in oral tale-telling and resulted in numerous publications, Robert Munsch's immensely popular works being a prime example.

It is not my purpose here to offer a detailed explication of the problems these attitudes and trends give rise to for folklore. Suffice it to say that a substantial proportion of the published folklore impedes rather than promotes understanding of the meanings and functions of folklore traditions. And not just scholars hold these opinions; many peoples whose traditions are appropriated and, alas,

frequently misrepresented, concur.

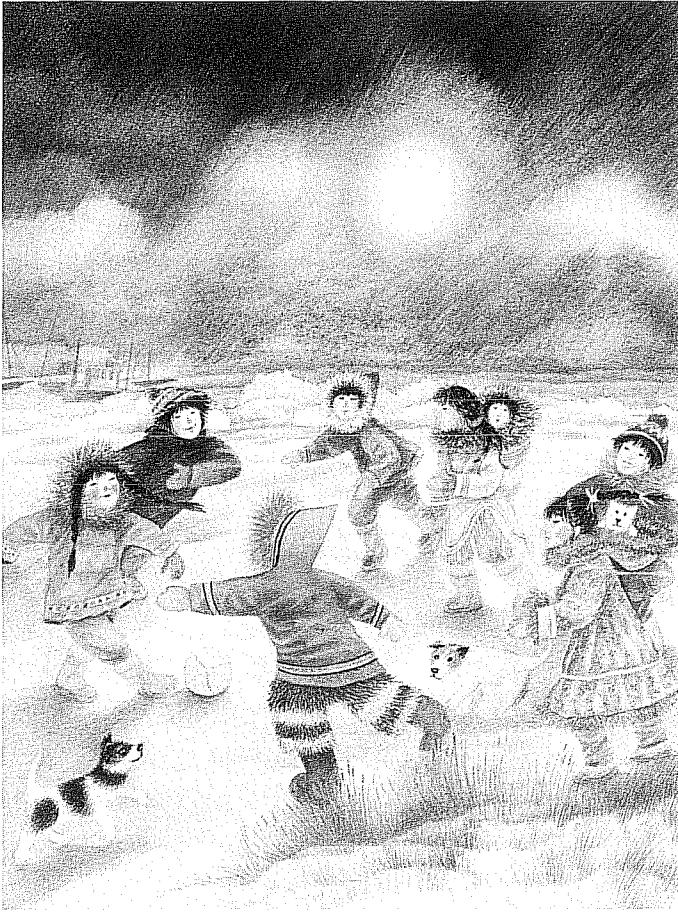
One group has responded to these concerns about misrepresentation: in 1991 the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society inaugurated the AESOP PRIZE to be conferred annually on a work published in English that best incorporates folklore in text and illustrations for children and young adults. The award aims to promote better folklore books by identifying criteria for judging quality in such works and establishing standards for the genre. The criteria for the AESOP PRIZE are the following:

1. The use of folklore should be central to the book's contents and, if appropriate, to its illustrations;
2. The folklore, as presented in the book, should accurately represent or reflect the cultural worldview of the people whose folklore is the focus of the book;
3. The reader's understanding of the folklore should be enhanced by its appearance in the book as should the book be enriched by the presence of the folklore;
4. The book should reflect the high artistic standards of the best of children's literature and have strong appeal to the child reader;
5. Folklore sources should be fully acknowledged and annotations referenced within the bound contents of the publication.

The judges for the AESOP PRIZE are chosen from amongst professionals in the field of Folklore-Folklife Studies. They must be specialists in children's folklore and have a substantial familiarity with children's literature to ensure their ability to evaluate the works submitted for both their folkloric merit and quality as children's books.

The first prizes were given in the Fall of 1992 to *Days of Awe: Stories from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (Viking), written by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Erika Weihs and *Aesop and Company: With Scenes from His Legendary Life* (Houghton), written by Barbara Bader and illustrated by Arthur Geisert. Already by the 1993 competition the impact of the award was evident. Over 120 books were submitted, some of which directly addressed the established criteria, especially in terms of handling sources. There were so many exceptionally qualified titles among the 1993 nominees that the AESOP Committee recommended the creation of an honorific adjunct to the prize, an AESOP ACCOLADE LIST. This annual roster of outstanding books from amongst the PRIZE nominees is recommended to readers of juvenilia who have a particular interest in folklore. The ACCOLADE LIST likely will be supplemented in the near future with a publication by the Children's Folklore Society of an historical listing of works of comparable merit.

Again, two books shared the 1993 AESOP PRIZE: *Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women in Myth, Legend and Tall Tale* (Philomel/Putnam), written by Robert D. San Souci and illustrated by Brian Pinkney and *Love Flute* (Bradbury Press/Macmillan), written and illustrated by Paul Goble. Amongst the six charter titles on the AESOP ACCOLADE LIST there was an exceptional



From *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails*. Illus. © 1993 Vladyana Krykorka

Canadian work, *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails* (Annick Press), written by Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak and illustrated by Vladyana Krykorka. Writing from within his own Inuit tradition, Kusugak offers ethnographic insight combined with human wisdom in his presentation of a traditional tale (known to scholars as a “dite”) explaining an awesome natural phenomenon to children. The book will charm and delight the younger child while teaching him/her in a palatable fashion about life patterns, in particular that most threatening aspect of life, namely death and specifically, the loss of a parent. The story itself is close to its traditional roots and is accompanied by vivid and culturally evocative illustrations. Overall, this book is an excellent example of the means as well as the value of presenting traditional lore of a delimited group to a broad multi-cultural audience.

A consideration of four other recently published Canadian works in terms of the criteria for the AESOP PRIZE will illustrate some of the current strengths and weaknesses in this genre of children's books in this country. The four works are *East of the Sun & West of the Moon*, *The King and the Tortoise*, *Thistle Broth*, and *The Revenge of Ishtar*.

In keeping with his previous works, Gál's *East of the sun ...* is an aesthetic delight. The text is a good retelling of a traditional Norwegian story and the illustrations are elegant and appropriate both to the spirit of an Old World wonder tale and to the specifics of old Norse culture. It is worth noting that the central figure, a female, is in keeping with the many powerful females to be found in traditional tales and quite unlike those reshaped by the pens of nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellers-cum-popularists. This girl has brains as well as beauty and uses both, along with the magic requisite to the fairy-tale genre, to bring about what she wants to occur—she is mistress of her own life, both good and bad.

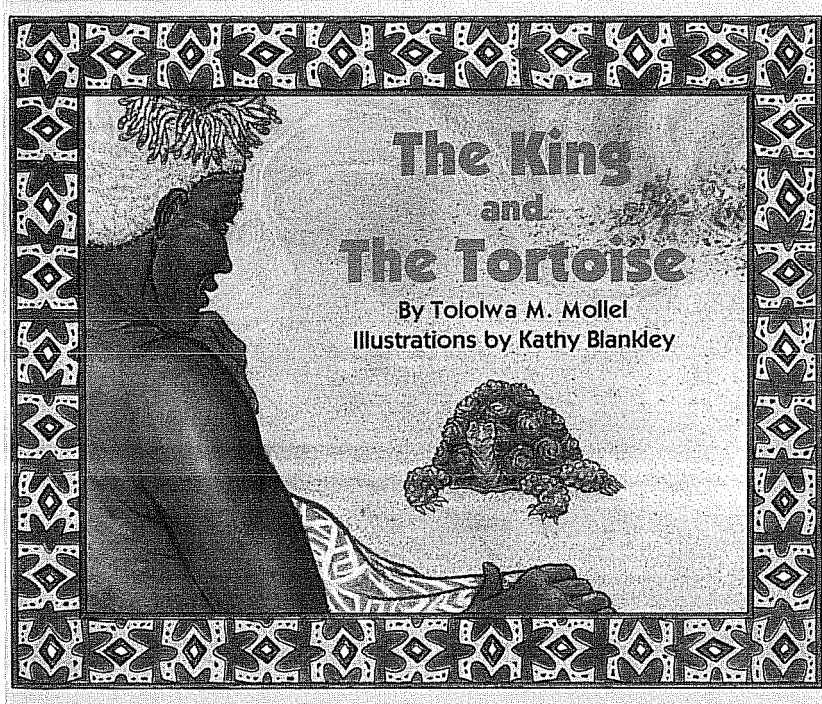
Yet, despite these fine qualities, Gál's book would be promptly, if regrettably,



From *East of the Sun & West of the Moon*. Illus. © 1993 László Gál

eliminated from the AESOPPRIZE competition on the basis of criteria three and five. The folklore is not enhanced by being presented in this work; it is used, but is not better understood as a result. Other than through the illustrations, the tale is not placed in its context; there is no indication of how it relates to other traditional tales from Norway or anywhere else; nothing is indicated about its usual tellers or audience. More serious, though, is Gál's failure to give credit to his source(s) and to indicate how his telling differs from anyone else's, published or otherwise. Had he used a portion of Lewis' *Narnia* series, or a segment of an Andersen tale, he would have been obliged to acknowledge it or face potential copyright violation. Unfortunately, here there is only one line—on the dust jacket not in the bound contents—indicating the Norwegian connection. Little effort would be necessary to provide the requisite annotation and even a bibliography for further reading. If the reteller does not wish to undertake the task, the publisher should employ a folklore graduate student to do so. Otherwise, those who produced this otherwise excellent book are effectively guilty of misappropriation of voice. The oral tradition may be largely in the public domain; it should not be open to avoidable abuse.

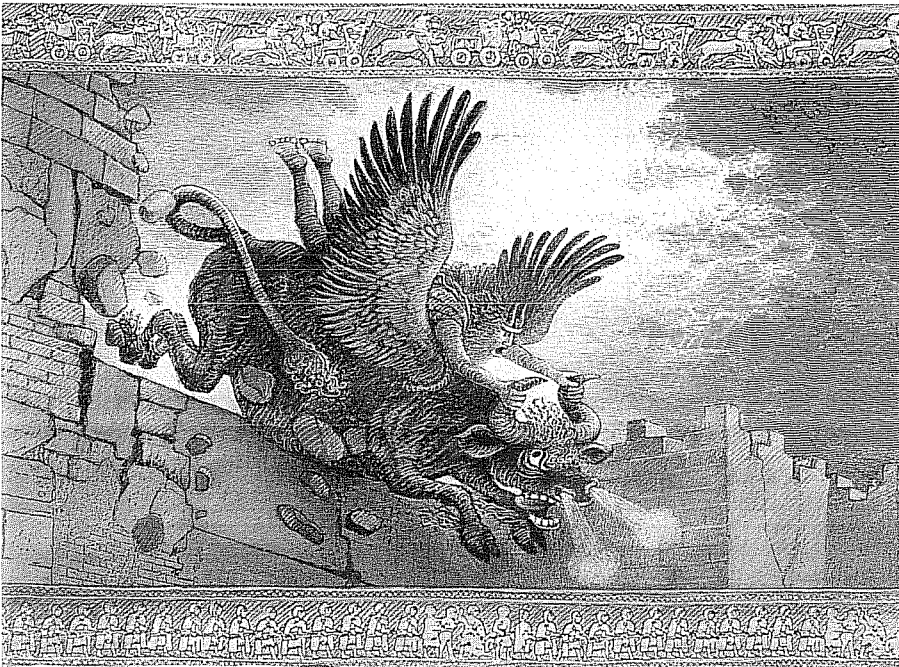
Mollet's charming book suffers from a similar disregard for sources. Again,



From *The King and the Tortoise*. Illus. © 1993 Kathy Blankley

only from the dust jacket can the reader learn that the textual derivation is Cameroon oral tradition—African, but distinct from Mollel’s own Tanzanian Arusha Maasai heritage. It’s not that a fine storyteller like Mollel should refrain from telling the tale—he does so extremely well in what is a delightful book. Rather, he should do justice to the tradition which produced the tale and explain the nature of this story, placing it within the context of trickster narratives generally and offering insight into how, where, to whom, and why it would be (and still is) traditionally told. The story has a natural appeal for children—the tortoise, a very unlikely hero (but a frequent trickster in African traditions), outsmarts the more likely swiftest, slyest, most fiercely powerful and strongest characters and dupes the king who has set an impossible task. The work is humour-filled; the illustrations are beautiful and culturally appropriate, even to the traditional Cameroon designs on the borders of the pages and fly-leaves which in blue, white and ochre geometric motifs evoke African fabric designs. Why not *really* exploit this opportunity and develop in young people an appreciation for the oral tradition by including a brief introduction or a concluding section on the lore and its bearers? African heritage in particular and folklore in general would be the better for it.

Ludmila Zeman’s second volume interpreting the Epic of Gilgamesh in a children’s book format is a thoroughly laudable work. It is small wonder that



From *The Revenge of Ishtar*. Illus. © 1993 Ludmila Zeman

Gilgamesh the King, Book I in this series, has already been widely appreciated by adults as well as children. *The Revenge of Ishtar* is destined for similar success for here is another segment of one of the greatest and most influential stories of humankind presented in an approachable and appealing picture-book. For the first time, the average person can access this monumental tale about such grand universal themes as the value of friendship, love scorned, revenge, loss of a beloved, mourning, dedication to a cause. The book has been thoroughly researched; in particular, Ms. Zeman has drawn together the fragmentary visual documentation for Mesopotamia and constructed a whole society from this anthropological and archaeological data. The results may be challenged over time, but they are the most complete re-creation of ancient Mesopotamia in pictures yet available. The resulting book is unquestionably beautiful and compelling. The story is, admittedly, attenuated and bowdlerized for a child audience. Nonetheless, its essence remains true and its power, unabated. This editing of the oral tale ought to have been discussed in the brief but good account of the story on the concluding page of the text, and a bibliographic note on the vast literature concerning the epic should probably have been added, though this handling of sources is basically adequate to satisfy the AESOP PRIZE criterion. In sum, this book is justifiably advertised (on its dust jacket) as "a rare and magnificent evocation of an ancient civilization and its ideals." It is what the AESOP PRIZE seeks to encourage and award.

Thistle Broth, meanwhile, is exemplary of the opposite. Advertised by the publisher as "a charming folktale," this book is not directly based on a traditional text, provides no insight into the numbskull tradition to which it can be connected, and offers no sources whatsoever. Here is an author's creation, albeit rendered in the format of the traditional cumulative tale and incorporating some traditional elements. But to claim it as a folktale is to suggest that professional storytellers such as Thompson are necessarily the contemporary voices of tradition. They *may*, on occasion, be a link in the chain of tradition; in many cases, they are simply performers, appropriating tales and voices primarily for their own use. In this instance, the teller is an imaginative talent whose oral creation has been rendered into print, that is, an author. Without a currency in oral tradition at some time past or present, a story is not a folktale even if it is produced in the mould of tradition.

Thompson's little moral yarn about a son struggling to please his father by completing an ever-growing series of tasks has a certain humorous appeal which probably comes over best in oral telling. The illustrations are visually quite attractive, but overall the book is not. The print font combined with no spacing between the lines makes for difficult reading; the layout of the pages with all the print squashed on the upper left page is awkward. Whatever its other merits, this book is not to be confused with folklore and would be immediately rejected from consideration in the AESOP PRIZE competition.

In the children's book industry as elsewhere, heritage is evidently market-

able. Some publishers are actively courting folklorists to write for children and increasing numbers are doing so for pleasure and profit. Recycling the past makes money, but carries with it decided ethical obligations. With respect to intangible heritage—much of which technically falls under the rubric of folklore—this obligation is not only to a specific source, but also to the culture being represented and to the overall oral tradition. Authors as well as publishers need to make the effort to promote intangible cultural conservation through judicious use and management of this ubiquitous but all too commonly misused resource. Wherever necessary, the industry ought to seek the advice of folklore professionals to ensure that their processes and products meet the requisite standards. Tales certainly need to be told to be appreciated; but they first must be appreciated to be told to their best advantage.

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ORAL POETRY FROM THE TRIBE CALLED CHILDREN

Doctor Knickerbocker and Other Rhymes: A Canadian Collection. David Booth. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Kids Can Press, 1993. 71 pages, \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-079-2. **Folk Rhymes from around the World.** Ed. Evelyn Neaman. Illus. Sally J.K. Davies. Pacific Educational Press, 1992. 54 pages, \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88865-081-7.

Children's play enriches otherwise mundane tasks or tedious rules. "Clean your room" is bearable when there are lions and tigers nipping at your heels or if the toy box is a trapdoor which leads to outer space. "Peter, Peter, if you're able/Get your elbows off the table" makes transgression fun and etiquette palatable. Rhymes and chants also heighten the childhood challenge to be the best—to skip longer and faster than anybody else in the schoolyard. Cat calls, action songs, taunts, tongue-twisters—are language play, and a means of antagonizing the enemy and defending oneself or one's friend.

These two collections of childhood rhymes elicit in me the playful child as well as the teacher. They compare beautifully—one is educational in intent, while the other is partly the result of an educational exercise. For the latter, *Knickerbocker*, David Booth and his son collected verses "during recess, on the bus, after four" as well as from books. Larry Swartz and his grade five students are thanked for "their help in discovering all the rhymes on their playground." Conversely, in *Folk Rhymes*, a publication of the Alternatives to Racism Society, formal research is emphasized and the book is more widely culturally representative. Notes accompanying each rhyme and section contribute to the sense of a teaching book. When *Folk Rhymes* was completed, the author used it