

Ill Writ by Moonlight

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Adventure at Moon Bay Towers, Marian Engel. Illustrated by Cupples. Clarke Irwin, 1974. 28 pp. (unnumbered). \$3.95 cloth

Hints of magic lurk in the enchanting title of Marian Engel's book. Fantasy is indicated by the half-open medieval door on the cover through which the reader is symbolically invited to pass on his trip to adventure. Indeed the story itself with its fabulous intermingling of children and animals necessitates that we pass through this entrance to another world. It posits what Desmond Pacey once described as "that curious state when reality and fantasy play a kind of slow ritual dance with each other."

In *Adventure at Moon Bay Towers*, Marian Engel has given us apparently real apartment and summer cottage settings, a symbolic world of animal fable, two shrewd children, and a magician in the form of the cottage owner who manipulates the strings to give the children imaginative experience.

Unfortunately, the author does not support this fictional potential by means of the evocative use of language. The reader is chained by the simplistic tone of the levelled-out sentences of the jerky prose. Marian Engel is a skilful plotter, but she is not, in this book, a skilful writer. As the children leave for adventureland, there is no heightening of style, no alteration of language or rhythm to waft readers to the kind of never-never cottage land where an alligator, a beaver, a skunk and two children sit down at the table with each other. A surprising experience demands the excitement of heightened speech and cannot be adequately conveyed by colloquialisms.

The author toys with the suggestion that the adventure, the imaginative experience of Rufus and Geraldine, is a dream. She writes: "One night when everybody thought they were asleep, they got up and packed their suit-cases..." It seems probable that the island is intended to represent the isolation of the imaginative experience from reality. This concept is underlined by the fact that the island can only be reached by row-boat across the waters of the subconscious imagination. The adventure is enclosed within the circular motifs of packing to leave the real world and packing to return to it. The departure for the island of their dreams, however, is not paralleled by a corresponding return to the reality of their bedrooms.

A paradox appears, within the cottage setting, in that the moon-madness of the animals exists in contrast with the continuing sanity of the children. The animals behave like cantankerous, bad-mannered children whom Rufus and Geraldine, playing the role of adults, struggle to control. The narrator instructs the reader concerning the behaviour of Geraldine: "She used the voice her mother used when she really meant what she said, and the racoon seemed to understand because he got up sheepishly and went to his tower." Thus the island

world becomes a microcosm of the real world. The children have moved from the position of being taught their lessons "in French, skating, music and dancing" to the cathartic experience of themselves being teachers, as well as organizers who must bring form and order from chaos. The children "make out" but the implications are that they are relieved to be able to return to their traditional social roles.

The children never ponder or wonder and give no evidence of an inner life which enables them to understand, to perceive meaning in the activities in which they become involved. Their row across the surface of the subconscious does not result in any emotional heightening or deepening; consequently, the reader does not become imaginatively involved in it.

The style of writing both in its selection and arrangement of words and in its total lack of metaphoric overtone, is in icy conflict with the warm feeling of mind-expanding excitement which the multi-level plot structure would seem to suggest.

For example, the flashlight, formally returned to the cottage owner by the children, could represent the illumination, the inner vision beyond that of day-to-day life, which the adventure, conceived as imaginative experience, has provided. The flashlight could represent insight which the children have had and to which the magus, the cottage owner, has shown the way. But it doesn't. It doesn't represent anything. There is no magic intended or implied by the giving back of the flashlight. What a magnificent image lies unexploited in the banal pages of *Moon Bay Towers* prose!

The book is beautifully designed and illustrated, as well as being reasonably priced. I see it, however, as an example of what can happen in an overzealous attempt to build too rapidly a body of Canadian children's fiction. As a reader, I fought imaginatively to go with the children to the island, but I could not go; Marian Engel did not work the necessary magic.

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