Canadian Fantasy

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Secret in the Stlalakum Wild, Christie Harris. Illustrations by Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1974. 200 pp. Paperback reprint. $3.95.

Reading through English Canadian fantasy books for children, one soon becomes aware of their general lack of stylistic distinction. Certainly, the prose of our best fantasy is competent and, at times, achieves some notable effects. There is, for example, the delicate pathos in the closing passage of Anne Wilkinson's *Swann & Daphne* (1960).[1]

> Every spring Swann spends a night and a day with Daphne, his young birch tree, and he comes again in the fall when he flies south again. He sings and whistles and wraps his feathers round her thin white bark, and Daphne bends down her branches and embraces him.
>
> And though they sigh when they part, they know how lucky they are to live a day and a night in the spring, and again in the fall, happily ever after (pp. 47-48).

Ruth Nichols demonstrates a talent for clear and subdued images which create an impression of a dream-like, elusive world. Here is a brief excerpt from her first novel, *A Walk Out Of The World* (1969).[2]

> When she lifted her head, the sunlight hurt her eyes but only for a moment, for it was not bright. Instead, it had a muted silver quality, very soft and brilliant. Thorn and Tobit were stirring in the grass beside her. It was not grass but more like wheat, and when they stood, they found it came up almost to their waists. It stretched away on either side of them, a pale, rustling sea (p. 92).

For a more forceful, perhaps less anaemic style, one need only go to Catherine Anthony Clark. Canada's most consistent writer of fantasy, Mrs. Clark often provides the reader with some fine moments of sharp observation combined with strong, energetic rhythm and refreshing imagery. Taken from the novel *The One-Winged Dragon* (1955)[3] the following passage describes the immediate sensation of two children as they fly into the night air on a dragon's back.

> Round and round they flew in the moonlight, with the Indian town lying in a black and lightless smudge below them. They swung round again, and there was the forest behind the Indian clearings, with its secret streams and gorges and the pale-gleaming summits above it. Now, as the Dragon felt the full power of his wings, they flew out to sea over the breaking surf into loneliness itself. The cold air whistled in the children's lungs; they drank speed like ice-water, with a delighted shock (p. 158).

The prose of memorable fantasy, however, is more than just delicate or clear or even energetic. It is the result of a writer's effort to

fashion the word or image that defines a deeply felt view of life. As Lillian Smith says in *The Unreluctant Years* (1953),[4] "[it] is more true, perhaps, of writers of fantasy than of any other writers except poets that they struggle with the inexpressible. According to their varying capacities, they are able to evoke ideas and clothe them in symbols, allegory, and dream" (p. 150).

Canadian writers of children's fantasy fiction tend to shy away from evocative prose structures and suggestive image patterns, perhaps under the illusion that children generally do no respond to a rich, highly textured style. Consequently, one is constantly aware of the split between the exciting adventures and sound moral views in our best fantasy stories and the limited prose which seldom comes near to what Eleanor Cameron, the American critic and writer of children's literature, has called "poetic overtone." In her brilliant study, *The Green and Burning Tree* (1969),[5] Miss Cameron insists that "words are as fantastical as wishes or charms. If we never learn to understand and to use them with subtlety and precision, we live at only half our mental height and width and breadth" (p. 28). I would merely add that wit and the pure delight in verbal play can also be characteristic of the enduring fantasy as much as poetic suggestiveness. The great revolutionary of children's literature, Lewis Carroll, cracked the iron patterns of conventional writing by simply introducing stunning and unforgettable instances of word play in the *Alice* books.

Hence, despite some rather remarkable effects in the works of Catherine Clark, notably in *The Silver Man* (1958), the prose of our fantasy fiction is unexceptional in texture and resonance. Pierre Berton's clever, albeit facile writing in *The Secret World of Og* (1961) does not approach the bright inventiveness and sparkling delight of E. Nesbit's style in such works as *Five Children and It* (1902), and *The Enchanted Castle* (1907). Nothing in Canadian writing for children equals the wit and verbal dexterity of Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tolbooth* (1961). For a style of autumnal beauty laced with emotional subtleties, we must turn from the pages of Canadian fantasy to Lucy Boston's novels of genius, *Children of Green Knowe* (1955), and *Treasure of Green Knowe* (1958).

This lack of "poetic overtone" or verbal inventiveness which weakens our fantasy literature derives from a central failure in the imagination of Canadian fantasists to concentrate upon the means of expression. They focus too self-consciously upon what the expression means. Our fantasy writers are too concerned with delineating the facts of a situation or with conveying the actions of a story with all possible expedition. But Sheila Egoff, one of Canada's most informed critics of children's literature, reminds us in her invaluable book, *The Republic of Childhood* (1967),[6] that "great fantasists are masters of method as well as message" (p. 135). The failure of our fantasy writers, therefore, to create a truly remarkable and singular work of fantasy indicates that they are primarily reporters with a moral tale. Only secondly are they creative artists of the magic word out of which is spun the great and significant fantasy.

Christie Harris, a prolific writer of books for young readers, has produced a novel which illustrates some of the problems of our fantasy

fiction. The recent reprint of *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild*, originally published by McClelland & Stewart in 1972, gives us an opportunity to enjoy what is good about the novel itself, and to discover why it is a less than satisfactory fantasy.

Mrs. Harris's career as a writer has been varied and not undistinguished. The general competency of *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* is surely the result of years of tending to the craft of writing for young readers. The hallmark of her style is a good-humored briskness which carries the story along in an uncomplicated, well-paced narrative. There is insufficient space here to examine all of Mrs. Harris's work in detail; but a measure of her achievement is perhaps suggested by the fact that she has written radio plays, domestic comedies for juvenile readers, notably *You Have to Draw the Line Somewhere* (1964) and *Confessions of a Toe-Hanger* (1967), true-life adventure stories, especially *Let X Be For Excitement* (1969), based upon the life of her own son, and historical fiction, particularly her impressive work, *Raven's Cry* (1966). She has also successfully re-told West Coast Indian legends in *Once Upon a Totem* (1963).

Indeed, Indian folk-lore and mythology have quite clearly made their imprint upon Mrs. Harris's imagination. Her finest work is directly concerned with the Indian life and legends of the Northwest. *Raven's Cry*, a winner of the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians Book of the Year Medal, remains a singularly moving paean to the now extinct Haida civilization of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Fully and accurately researched, *Raven's Cry* portrays the complexities and uniqueness of the Haida culture with insight, wonder, and compassion. Mrs. Harris's view is neither sentimental, romantic, nor patronizing. She reports Haida life as it was lived on the islands with the clear eye and honesty of the sympathetic chronicler. Mrs. Harris returns to the Haida again in her later novel, *Forbidden Frontier* (1968). In the character of Djaada, the Haida wife of a Hudson's Bay Company official, Mrs. Harris created a figure of dignity and pride, a woman who could ignore the white man's insults and stupidity but who could not ignore the loss of Haida self-respect. Again, one trusts the historical accuracy of the writing.

When it comes to fantasy, however, historical accuracy and sympathetic chronicling are of secondary importance. Fantasy is an art form in its own right and as such must be granted special attention. A writer should therefore be more concerned with creating a "secondary world," to use Tolkien's famous phrase, than with reporting the conditions of reality, past or present. Fantasy gives insight into reality, illumines imperishable truths of human life; but it does not depend upon the real world for its conception or its logic. When a writer attaches a moral or spiritual view onto the fantasy like a piece of bunting, he is, in effect, depending upon the idiom of the real world for thematic support. Such a dependence leads to uninspired writing and an essentially unconvincing fantasy. All significant fantasy, however, is autonomous to the degree that it does not at all draw upon the patented formulae of reality in order to express "the inexpressible."

One thinks of the way E. B. White handles the complicated issue of life and death, for example, in *Charlotte's Web* (1952), or how George MacDonald introduces the concept of evil in *At the Back of the North*

Wind (1870). In both instances, the morality is an intrinsic part of the prose and situation, growing out of the story like perennial flowers from a rich soil. Canadian writers, on the other hand, generally tend to record their stories, imagine various suitable, fantastical characters and incidents, and then frame it all with an unsubtle moral lesson. Anne Wilkinson's *Swann & Daphne* suffers from this kind of moral imposition as does Pierre Berton's fantasy with its intrusive social satire. Catherine Anthony Clark often fails to integrate fully the moral situation of her young heroes into the actual fantasy so that one is often confronted with a double framework: the fantasy itself, and the child's moral and/or emotional development.

The morality of *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* also shows signs of this tendency in Canadian fantasy literature. Morann, the heroine of the story, is introduced as a somewhat dissatisfied young girl who feels particularly ignored by her family. This is demonstrated by the way everyone rushes out of the car at an airport where the family drove to meet a visiting cousin, Sarah, a university student planning a preliminary anthropological investigation into Indian life of the region.

> Somehow, everyone got out ahead of Morann. Somehow, everyone got in front of her, blocking her off after they spotted Sarah. She knew she wouldn't even be noticed, as usual (p. 14).

Morann's feelings of neglect are very real and stem from her own sense of worthlessness. Unable to believe in herself and her special qualities, she is prone to saying and doing tiresome and foolish things, in a vain attempt to be noticed.

> Why did she always blurt out something stupid when she desperately wanted to say something nice? Somehow, what she said never came out cute or smart, it just seemed to come out loud.
> Keeping up a bold front, Morann cringed inwardly. She had panicked as usual. But what were you going to do if you hadn't been born with something that just naturally made you noticeable (p. 15).

The ultimate point of Mrs. Harris's fantasy, it would seem, is to teach Morann that she has unique value and individual worth. To this end, Morann's self-education process becomes involved with her quest for treasure which, an Indian spirit informs her, has been built up over millions of years, a fact that provides some indication of its fabulous value.

She first meets the spirits, the Band of Invisibles, after initially hearing their voices when she gets separated from the others on an expedition up a mountain to Stlalakum lake. Stlalakum itself, the book informs us, means "Anything uncanny. The place. The thing. Stlalakums are unnatural beings living in the natural world" (p. 25).

There is marvellous opportunity here for the creation of a convincing, secondary world, even if the world is represented by a single agent. More importantly, such a meeting is a chance for the suggestive qualities of an evocative, subtle prose to play upon the reader's imagination. The author disappoints us.

A shimmer of pearl flashed up onto a hummock of grass. It was a

little person. Yet it wasn't a little person.
A UFO has landed, Morann thought. A flying saucer. It's a little being from Outer Space.
It was a little person. Yet it wasn't a little person (80).

Morann's response, as Mrs. Harris portrays it, is anticlimactic. The odour of cliché hovers about such terms as "flying saucer," and "UFO." The description of the spirit immediately after this is not without its fine touches; but unfortunately the book stylistically remains one of occasional effects. The writing is more consistently functional than inspired.

The limited quality of the prose seems to be the natural consequence of Mrs. Harris's uncertain grasp of the nature of fantasy. She is not primarily a writer of fantasy literature, and the prose of *Raven's Cry*, significantly enough, is considerably more interesting than that of *Stlalakum*. Because of her inexperience in the genre, the author persistently undercuts the fantasy elements of the novel. Instead of creating a logic which arises from and supports the fantasy, Mrs. Harris relies upon the empirical data of the real world to give scientific respectability to the central fantastical conception, the Indian view that all nature is richly endowed with communicating spirits or stlalakums who are sensitive to the presence of humanity. This is unfortunate because it wastes so much time at the beginning of the book where Mrs. Harris, for example, quotes directly from an article in an issue of *Wildlife* magazine concerning experiments about the psychogalvanic reflex of plant cells to prove that they do indeed "react emotionally to every threat to their well being" (p. 21).

The point of this information has its thematic relevance later when Morann discovers what constitutes the real treasure she takes such great pains to seek. Hence, one is aware of the basic contrivance of the fantasy; but, to her credit, Mrs. Harris does show the creative good sense to translate the jargon of the article into comic terms.

Morann is fascinated by the concept.

She asked Neil a few more questions when she took the magazine back. And standing there, trying to follow his answers, she absent-mindedly pulled a leaf off a rosebush and began tearing it apart. "Oh! Excuse me!" she gasped to the rosebush. And she meant it. She could just *feel* the other leaves' horror at what she had done (p. 23).

If she is ever to discover the treasure and be noticed, however, Morann has first to prove her moral worth to the Stlalakum spirits, represented by one Siem, handsomely dressed in robes "like spun mother-of-pearl." Siem is the most important fantastical character in the novel; but the difficulty with his characterization is that one cannot really believe in him as either an Indian or a spirit. He sounds too much like Henry Higgins. In response to Morann's exclamation, "Leaping leppercorns!" Siem says: "Do not conjure up those grasping immortals" (p. 79)! Later he adds: "I distinctly heard you summoning leprechauns, though your pronunciation leaves something to be desired" (p. 80). Too often as well, he is a mouthpiece for castigating the white man's stupidity about the wilds.

> You are all the same. Distrustful. It must be from the tales you hear. Tales that make the Wild a dreadful place full of dripping red claws and bared fangs. Tales that turn our friendly wolves into fearsome, blood-thirsty villains. 'The Big Bad Wolfe!' they tell you. 'The Wicked Dragon! The Sly Fox! The Satanic Serpent!' (p. 88-89)

As a character, Siem illustrates what is wrong with *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* specifically, and what is wrong with Canadian fantasy generally: the absence of memorable characters who are unmistakably a part of a richly imagined fantasy and who never sound a false note therein. When an author concentrates upon getting the story told and making the moral point clear, however, character is evidently sacrificed. That aside, Morann proves her moral worth to the Band of Invisibles and to herself by spending a night alone on Devil's Mountain next to Stlalakum lake, no mean feat when one considers that Sexqui, the two-headed serpent, inhabits the waters. But it is important enough to Morann that she do so.

> Sooner or later, Sarah and the girls would have to decide whether Morann was a sulky, snivelling freak or a courageous adventurer. If she had anything to do with it, she intended to be a courageous adventurer (p. 124).

Those chapters describing Morann's ordeal of being alone, stuck in her sleeping bag, in forbidding surroundings are among the best in the book. Mrs. Harris is quite capable of creating a very tense mood, of depicting an environment which could, seemingly, come alive to destroy an intruder. At moments like these, her style deepens in quality to convey some rather fine effects.

> Deeper in the woods, the ferns took over. They spouted up from the earth in vigorous fountains, luminous green where the sun filtered through to them, brooding and dark where the trees' shadows fell across them. She could smell the ferns. Or perhaps it was the moist earth she could smell, and the dark slugs hiding there, watching her. She could sense the worms crawling along through the loose forest floor, turning everything back into wilderness. She could feel the woods' rejection of her. If she fell and couldn't get up, everything there would work to silently cover her over until they silently turned her, too, into quiet green growth (p. 127).

Because she survives this experience, Morann goes on her way to find the treasure. Earlier references to the white man's stupidity about nature, especially oil spills, are explained. The natural world is threatened with extinction. Hence, the stlalakum spirits or the psychogalvanic reflexes of the plants are alarmed. Morann's moral education whereby she becomes an individual of real worth now depends upon her recognition that the fabulous treasure of the Stlalakum wild is really the awesome beauty and mystery of nature herself.

Having actually discovered a nugget of gold, Morann has a moral decision to make: whether or not to reveal to the world that she did indeed find gold and begin the process of the rape of the wild. By remaining silent, she respects the integrity and inviolability of the natural world. As Siem says: "Everything and everybody has a

potential for good or for harm, Morann. You must make you own decision'' (p. 183).

Morann's choice is indicated by the following passage.

> Morann slipped the gold nugget swiftly into her pocket and zippered it up tight. She was not going to be rich. Not going to be important. She was going to be something better. She was going to be worthy of the beauty the world had built up (p. 183).

Secret in the Stlalakum Wild works hard to be a ''relevant'' book for young readers. Hence, the moral vision, if one can call it that, sounds a bit thin, a kind of truism which it is now fashionable to introduce into a book of this kind. Because Mrs. Harris's fantasy is not provided with its own controlling logic and is by and large undeveloped as a fantasy, because it is not conveyed in a prose of ''poetic overtones,'' because no single character emerges strongly and memorably, *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* is not a success as an example of significant fantasy fiction.

That should not, however, blind us to the novel's real merits. It is a book that asks us to respect the natural world. It is a book that describes some of the beauty of that world with love and precision. It is a book of good humour and good companionship. The illustrations by Douglas Tait more than enhance the text. They are sensitive drawings of the wild, touched with mystery and dignity. Highly readable, *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* deserves a wide audience and, hopefully, that audience will now avail themselves of the reprint.

NOTES

1 Anne Wilkinson, *Swann & Daphne* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1960)

2 Ruth Nichols, *A Walk Out Of The Wòrld* (Don Mills, Longmans, 1969)

3 Catherine A. Clark, *The One-Winged Dragon* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1955)

4 Lillian Smith, The *Unreluctant Years* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953)

5 Eleanor Caneron, *The Green and Burning Tree* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969)

6 Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967)

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