

# Cranes and Crickets — Canadian Animal Fantasy

GAIL L. COX

*Cricket Christmas*, Heather Kellerhals-Stewart. Illus. by Lucy Yarmowish. Borealis, 1978. 26 pp. \$3.95

*Rory and the Whooping Crane*, Heather Kellerhals-Stewart. Borealis, 1977. \$4.95.

Both *Rory and the Whooping Crane* and *Cricket Christmas*, slender new paperbacks by Heather Kellerhals-Stewart, are animal fantasies. The former begins with a strong realistic scene and dissolves into weak fantasy. The latter is fantasy throughout.

In *Rory and the Whooping Crane*, a young boy, together with mother and sister, accompany biologist father to Canada's Northwest Territories to study the once-secret nesting habitat of the elusive, almost extinct, whooping crane. One stormy night, a gigantic whooping crane takes Rory from his rain-soaked tent to stand trial as human scapegoat before a tribunal of extinct birds and beasts, a few of which give testimony to man's cruelty and idiocy with regard to the indiscriminate killing of Earth's creatures. A unicorn is judge. When the animals become over-excited and attempt to lynch Rory, the giant crane, the humpback whale and the pupfish rescue him and return him to the campsite. Rory relates the story of his adventure to his sister, Sandy. Later, the giant crane leads both to a lame young bird which they decide to raise. The story ends.

The plot of *Cricket Christmas* is simpler. At the approach of winter, Stalky Cricket refuses to fight for a hole in the warm frame of the cottage where Erika and Markus live with their grandparents. He remains outdoors where his almost frozen body is discovered by puppy Ruggles and inevitably is carried inside by the children. On Christmas eve Stalky leads the other insects in a joyful, magical musical concert around the Christmas Tree. When the tree laden with fat and bird seed is discarded after Christmas, Stalky cannot be found. The story ends with Ruggles committed to a lifetime search for his special cricket.

Both stories are rural in setting. Of the two, *Rory* has the more distinctly Canadian atmosphere. Indeed, because of the crane's habits, the plot could only occur in the Northwest Territories. The vastness of the forest, with its muskeg and blackflies, provides a brief but characteristic Canadian survival scene. Rory's terror of being lost in the forest is real and immediate. In *Cricket* only the harsh winter could be construed as Canadian. But it could just as possibly be that of Eurasia.

The fantasy in *Rory* is unbelievable, even preposterous. The blend of reality and fantasy is too carelessly drawn. The issue of the total extinction of once-living creatures by man is too grave to be presented in such a ridiculous fashion. The presentation of the extinct animals and their complaints is naive and too ob-

viously verging on the pathetic. The drama of the tribunal is absurd. The reader feels neither pity nor fear for Rory. The idea of Rory as representative of mankind holds no credibility. In many instances insufficient reason is given for action occurring in the plot. The author herself seems to be aware of some weaknesses. For example, she appears to recognize the idea of Rory as stand-in for *Homo sapiens* is a bit far-fetched. She has Rory give the innocent's standard reply to the accusation that he is guilty by association and because of the foolish remarks he had made: "I'm too young and I haven't done anything. I'm not a criminal". With regard to the inconsistency of having a unicorn as judge at a tribunal of extinct animals, Kellerhals-Stewart has Rory comment, "Why that's ridiculous! A unicorn doesn't even exist - he is only an imaginary beast." The integrity of the extinct animals is put in question when the trial begins and Rory is left without a lawyer. The whale, which was to represent Rory, disappears simply because Rory covers his ears. It then reappears, with as little reason, to rescue him. The giant crane, which initially brought Rory to court, suddenly changes allegiance and hastily rescues him. And why is their accomplice, a pupfish, familiar with the river system of the Territories, when the glossary at the back of the book says that the pupfish is a native of the American southwest? What could the final outcome of a tribunal have been?

Perhaps the message of this book could be better conveyed in a non-fiction world, such as those listed in the bibliography. Or perhaps this work of fiction would have been more effective if it had focused on one species of extinct animal, or if it has presented a dramatic relationship between man and beast, or between beast and beast. A book such as Nathaniel Benchley's *Kilroy and the Gull* comes to mind, although it does not preach about extinction. A light touch could have been used, such as E. B. White employed in his *The Trumpet of the Swan*, which is partially set in western Canada.

There is some humorous, fast-flowing dialogue in *Rory*, especially between the lad and the pupfish. Kellerhals-Stewart has drawn Rory as a character who can consistently be credited with "spunk". The fading of the unicorn is a lovely feature, although too isolated in this story, and occurring with insufficient reason. The reappearing gigantic crane, seemingly invisible to adults, is a bit too amusing as a concept to be taken seriously.

In *Cricket Christmas*, Stalky, like Rory, displays a certain bravado. Initially, he gives the impression of being in the same mold as Bubber, the hero of Alan Arkin's *The Lemming Condition*. We soon discover however that *Cricket Christmas* lacks the thoughtful deliberation and personal growth of the individual in spite of the mindlessness of the group, and also the suggestion of warmth of close friendship which characterizes Arkin's book.

The plot of *Cricket Christmas* is of no particular interest or consequence. Again, as in *Rory*, too much is taken for granted. No reason is given for Stalky's disappearance. He is not developed as a sympathetic character. When he disappears only Ruggles, the puppy cares. All the characters lack dimension. The puppy's conversation is silly. The grandfather seems to be constantly expressing annoyance. For a Christmas story there is very little evidence of the warmth traditionally associated with this time of year. On the other hand, the observations about the day after Christmas do have an accuracy and a poignancy similar to the observation in *Rory* about the last days of summer.

The format of both paperbacks is suitable for easy reading at approximately a grade three level. The type is bold, clear and well-spaced. However, the only illustration in *Rory* is a crudely drawn black-and-white map in which both the words "Northwest" and "Territories" are misspelled. A more professionally executed map, with colour highlights to add interest, would have been welcome, as would some illustrations. *Cricket Christmas* is decorated with six black-and-white full-page drawings by Lucy Yarmowish. Colour would have brought some Christmas cheer to the work. Although the covers of both are coloured, there is too much black-and-white inside, and too little drama or entertainment to entice readers to these books.

Heather Kellerhals-Stewart has also written *Muktu, the Backward Muskox* and *She Shoots, She Scores!*.

#### Bibliography:

Arkin, Alan. *The Lemming Condition*. Harper, 1976. 58 pp.

Benchley, Nathaniel. *Kilroy and the Gull*. Harper, 1977. 118 pp.

Kellerhals-Stewart, Heather. *Muktu the Backward Muskox*. K. E. S. Ltd. Vancouver, 1975. 32 pp., paper.

Kellerhals-Stewart, Heather. *She Shoots, She Scores!* Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1975. 54 pp., paper.

White, E. B. *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Harper, 1970. 210 pp.

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## A Tale about Northern Survival

ROBIN GEDALOF

*A Journey of Many Sleeps*, J. M. Scott. Chatto and Windus, 1975. 137 pp. \$7.25 hardcover.

**A** *Journey of Many Sleeps* is a story of an Inuit boy who loses his family and is subsequently carried off to the United States by an American do-gooder. His return to the Arctic a year later with members of the Society of Universal Citizenship is uneventful until their chartered plane crashes on its way south. The pilot dies and young Martluk is stranded in the bush with three very unstable adults. After various adventures, during which he finds his Inuit training to be emotionally and practically supportive, Martluk manages to save himself and the three adults.