

Overall, Munsch's books are super stories for small children and will become standards in the repertoire of quality Canadian books. Salsberg's book will, I think, have little lasting impact on children, with the possible exception of the central image of rising in a bubble gum bubble. Sendak has remarked that creating picture books is like walking a tightrope because one slip in either the writing or the illustrations destroys the unity of the book.³ Munsch does not slip. Unfortunately, the format of Salsberg's book and its picture-to-text ratio suggest that it is a picture book for non-readers. Nevertheless, its symbolic elements and rambling story make it largely unsuitable for pre-schoolers and most appropriate for six to nine-year-olds. All three books have an appealing size and format; all are delightfully playful and not sex-stereotyped; all are quality productions which are a welcome addition to the library of Canadian books for young children.

NOTES

¹Beverley Allinson, *Mandy and her Flying Map*. Toronto, Women's Press, 1974.

²Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York, Vintage Books, 1977.

³Maurice Sendak, *New York Times Magazine*, 1974.

Carol Anne Wien teaches in the Education department (Child Study) at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.



Phantafelix

GAEL BLACKHALL

Catlands, Felix Vincent. Illus. by author. Tundra, 1977. 20 pp. \$9.95 cloth.

The Painted Cougar, Elisabeth Margaret Hopkins. Illus. by author. Talonbooks, 1977. Unpaged. \$7.95 cloth.

Elisabeth Margaret Hopkins and Felix Vincent are artists first and authors second. Yet the texts of *The Painted Cougar* and *Catlands* are superior to most fantasy picture books published in Canada. These stores are not limited by regionalism and consequently they have potential for the international market. As artists Hopkins and Vincent have enjoyed successful solo exhibitions: Hopkins at the Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver and Vincent at the Gallery Libre in Montreal. Both artists practice a naive art style and are preoccupied with the vegetative detail in secret feline worlds. Hopkins paints a more anthropomorphised world whereas Vincent's *Catlands* is more surreal. Nevertheless, the visual success of both *The Painted Cougar* and *Catlands* rests on the use of lively background activity to support and emphasize foreground figures.

Born on April 22, 1894, in Fort Gilkicker, Hampshire, Hopkins took up permanent residence in Canada in 1954. The drawings and paintings of Frances Annie Hopkins, her step-grandmother, who was married to a Hudson Bay Company employee, are housed in the Public Archives. The late poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was also a relative (a first cousin once removed). E.M. Hopkins began to paint seriously during her sixties producing animal mandalas, watercolours of plants and various works in gouache. One of her works was included in the 1978 UNESCO Christmas card series.

The Painted Cougar, set within the imaginary confines of a cougar's world, marks a new career for octogenarian Hopkins, and is Talonbooks' first effort for children. Hammerhead didacticism is refreshingly absent from this story and it will delight the observant child. With a naïveté similar to St. Exupéry's in *Le Petit Prince*, Hopkins' figures are drawn in pencil, outlined in ink, and finished with watercolour washes. Although the illustrations have been bled to the edges of the page there is ample contrast to ensure that the cleanly set type is legible.

Leon, a cougar, travels in order to improve himself in the eyes of others. One can sense his sincerity from the first page where the reader feels the warmth of Leon's admiring gaze lingering on the sleeping female cougar, Lurline. At first glance the book seemed emotionally flat. In fact, Hopkins' humour is evident only on a second look. As Leon makes his way to town he sees a laden picnic table which has suddenly and unaccountably been vacated. Why? Only the illustrations show the telltale flurry of people running away from an approaching cougar. Leon next meets a stylized dragon who is definitely not reptilian; he is crêpe paper bright like the dragons of Chinese New Year celebrations. However, the inner logic of the fantasy wanes when Leon spies a man and wants his wrist watch. Earlier in the story Leon does not know what a teapot is; why, therefore, should he be able to identify a wrist watch? If the reader is to remain enmeshed in the story's fantasy then the fanciful must seem consistent. Fortunately, the illustrations correlate well with the text and this weakness is masked.

As in *Le Petit Prince* the snake is a character endowed with special fascination. The flamboyance of the dragon and of the snake versus the tawny camouflage of a cougar make for good artistic balance. In order that Leon too can be beautiful the snake paints on the cougar's coat the sights Leon has seen on his travels: a beer bottle, pipe, starfish, book, teapot and wrist watch. This documents Leon's inner enrichment in a visible way. However, this reviewer really did not understand why Leon felt he had to undertake a journey. Was it a question of self-discovery or self-esteem? It is especially puzzling since "Lurline told Leon that she loved him even without his paintings."

From the magical world where squirrels, snails, songbirds and dragons rub shoulders, Leon returns to the desert and his kind. Because of Leon's unique appearance, his peers crown him king. Nevertheless, it is only a temporary transformation: Lurline's welcoming kisses wash away his fine body paintings.

The success of Hopkins' art lies in her use of lively details separated by generous expanses. The effect is to encourage the reader's eye to rove over the page and to linger over the vibrant but independent pockets of visual activity. The juxtaposition of creatures from diverse habitats subtly sets the context for fantasy, as a bat, a rabbit, a jackdaw and assorted reptilia comfortably jostle for space. The simple figures are not static. Textures are varied. Movement is indicated by an inclined limb; cougar eyes flicker with intelligence. Like the subtleties of human body language, shading, shape and line of eyesight are used to show interaction among the characters. By placing Leon on a road of discovery the author changes the story location from desert to seashore to meadow thereby preserving the fantastic element.

Felines are famous for their inscrutability and mysterious emotional vacancy. Using oil on canvas, painter Felix Vincent (born 1946) indulges his professed fascination with cats and birds in a full colour picture book published by Tundra. Vincent studied art in Lyons and Paris before immigrating to Canada.

Juna, the protagonist of *Catlands*, looks after seven cats whom she has named after the days of the week. One day, in gratitude for her care, the cats whisk her to Catlands where cats exist when they close their eyes. Roles are reversed. Her cats accompany, protect and carry her in precisely the same ways that she cares for them. Vincent has cleverly emphasized Juna's absorption into Catlands by making her facial characteristics echo those of the cats. Even though the feline escorts are introduced in order of the days of the week, young readers may become confused by the number of cats introduced. These cats are only differentiated by colour; they do not possess distinctive facial or breed characteristics. This confusion is compounded because Juna is also guided through Catlands by cats who are strangers.

Winter, spring, summer; desert, jungle: such changes of season and milieu necessitate magical clothing changes for Juna. If the clothing

changes were consistently related to a change of feline companion or of locale, continuity would not be a problem. These extra changes of attire confound the observant reader.

The bilingual text (presented on a split page) extends the book's audience to both the unilingual preschooler and the intermediate school-age child learning French. Aloud, the text flows well in both languages. There is, however, a discrepancy between what the jacket blurb states as the crux of the book and what the story achieves. The overleaf describes Catlands:

They are where kittens learn to be cats by watching birds; cold lands where cats are like snow, only warmer; hot deserts where cats are like sand, only softer; exotic jungles where flowers resemble the eyes of cats; gentle valleys where rainbows lead back home; and best of all, because black cats fly at night and white cats fly by day . . .

This reviewer is convinced that these are the kinds of mysteries Vincent was trying to explore. However, magic intangibles are easily dissipated by an episodic treatment exemplified by Vincent's repeated changes of feline guides.

Writing fantasy naturally includes license but a reader needs a realistic springboard in order to suspend his disbelief with minimal exertion. Experimenting with "natural" inaccuracies is dangerous in fantasy because it undermines the kind of imaginative leaps the reader will undertake. Vincent forces this when one of the cats gently admonishes Juna that the only way to know birds is to watch them not catch them. Then the author's idealized vision of cats and birds intrudes. Epithets such as "Cats are like snow, only warmer" and "Cats want to be birds" bewilder children and adults when they are not couched in context. Another feline character sounds like a human cynic in cat's clothing: "Cats and birds spend more time watching each other than is good for either of them." (Is this a fanciful explanation of malevolent instincts?) Catlands lose their magic realism when the cats lose their animal realism.

As a painter, Vincent easily masters the atmospherics of Catlands. Each page of illustration contains Juna, cat(s), and birds flanked by a colour streaked sky and willowy-limbed vegetation. The surreal character of Vincent's illustrations cannot be faulted and will appeal to adults. The magic sense of otherness will please children. The visual transition from the stark expanses of winter to the budding airiness of spring to the lush fecundity of summer is incomparable and of international calibre.

Gael Blackhall, a graduate of Queen's, UBC and the College of Librarianship Wales International Summer School, is a Children's and Young People's Librarian with Vancouver Public Library.