

Wynkyn Whimsies

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The Green Wizard, Joan Raeside. Illus. by Adrian Raeside. Wynkyn Press, 1977. \$1.50 paper.

The Train That Got Lost, Joan Raeside. Illus. by Adrian Raeside. Wynkyn Press, 1977. \$1.50 paper.

Sir Basil de Bold Rescues a Maiden, Joan Raeside. Illus. by Adrian Raeside. Wynkyn Press, 1977. \$1.50 paper.

In an attempt to avoid explaining his work, George MacDonald once observed that "the tale is there, not to hide, but to show." He further declared that "the best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is — not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself." While MacDonald's criteria might appear taxing, Joan Raeside's four little books fare quite well under their terms. There is nothing obscure about her simple straightforward plots. They are brief drolleries, rather like fairytales, diverting, and with likeable wry touches.

Raeside is an Englishwoman who arrived in Canada six years ago via New Zealand. Wynkyn Press, located on Saltspring Island, British Columbia, is a family concern. She and her husband, the prize-winning biographer, print the books, while son Adrian illustrates them. With the exception of the slightly more sophisticated *Sir Basil de Bold*, Raeside wrote all of the books for her own boys a long time ago. Her real interest is music. She has written children's songs and operettas and composed the Saltspring Eucharist for the local Anglican Church. She labels herself "a frustrated composer," but her stories hint more at enjoyment than frustrations. There again, we are reminded of George MacDonald, who insisted on the art linking the fairytale and the sonata.

The most successful of these four books is *The Lucky Little Dragon*. The jogtrot rhythm of its verse is commendable. Each full page offers a stanza and an illustration. Such regularity makes the bizarre turns of the story all the more appealing. Little Dragon Dennis suffers from a crucial problem.

Dennis was a dragon
With a low boiling point,
He couldn't boil a kettle,

A similar ironic turnabout is central in her humorous glance at the chivalric tradition, *Sir Basil de Bold Rescues a Maiden*. Clumsy, illiterate, tongue-tied Sir Basil bursts into a maiden's ivory tower and forcibly sweeps her downstairs – forgetting to hitch up her gown in the process. Hardly a Byrhtnoth, Basil is shrewishly berated by the unhappily disturbed lady:

'And take my advice, Sir overbold knight
When rescuing dames in distress,
In future, first ASK if they really want out
And then, if they do, MIND THEIR DRESS!

Raeside has explained that the story developed around the knight whom her son drew for the "Wynkyn Good Knight Books" logo. And so we have a Rapunzel who does not want to be rescued, and is more interested in writing a letter to her lover Sir Percival, as indicated by a note headed "Dear Percy." Benighted Basil does not recognize a Spenserian situation when he is facing it:

Or even roast a joint.
He couldn't get up steam, poor lad,
He couldn't even glow.
Yes,
Dennis was a failure
As far as dragons go.

As heckled and scorned as Andersen's ugly duckling, Dennis too is shamefully tipped from the nest. The little dragon's voyage is neither as lengthy nor as lacerating as the duckling's. He does not need to contemplate suicide in his admiration of the royal swans. The fears of the village folk Dennis encounters are allayed, thanks to the ungrammatical insight of a child. Like Andersen's "voice of innocence" who brings the charade of "The Emperor's New Clothes" to a halt, Raeside's child calls out:

'He hasn't got no smoke!
(You must excuse the grammar
He was such a little bloke.)

Realizing that such a rarity will bring them fame, the villagers cast aside their fears and offer unfiery Dennis a warm welcome:

The battened UP their hatches,
They wrecked the barricade.
They sallied forth with currant buns
All warm and freshly made.
They patted him upon the head
They groomed him till he shone.
How
His eyes did sparkle
As they put the polish on!

The last illustration depicts a totally docile Dennis having his claws clipped by a grinning podiatrist.

'CURSED BE THE MAN WHO DARES ENTER IN'

This motto is carved on the door.

This didn't worry Sir Basil one bit;

He couldn't read, what's more.

Although the metre of these stanzas is neither as successful nor as rigorous as in *The Dragon*, the foliate borders that surround each verse emblematically further the humour at the expense of the heraldic convention.

The Green Wizard, the tale of a special tournament in which wizards "try to out-magic each other," again provides joshingly medieval action. Though briefer and not part of a larger story, the tourney of the green and the yellow wizards recalls the match between T.H. White's Merlin and Madame Mim in *The Sword in the Stone*. In Raeside's book there is a nice final twist as the yellow glove, "exactly the right size for the Princess," loses the day to the surprise appearance of an emerald ring on her fourth finger. The black ink illustrations are cartoon-like; the most memorable picture was the final silhouette of the Yellow Wizard crouching alone near his meagre fire. (Quite unexpectedly, the children who provided my test audience did not find the lack of any green or yellow colouring in the illustrations at all detracting.)

Although Raeside sees *The Train That Got Lost* as "the favourite," the product of reading about trains over and over again during a bout of measles, this is the one story that did not do well with my own young or old readers. Like the train, the direction of the story seems either forgotten or mislaid. An engine called Billy stands its unnamed driver in the middle of a field. Helpful and informative magpies tell the driver that the tracks lead to the moon. This revelation would be the sterling opportunity for a writer like Joan Aiken, but Raeside's glumly matter-of-fact driver only sighs, "I don't suppose it matters one way or the other because we can't go, moon or no." Graham Greene was able to bring direction and sentiment to stories of a little fire engine and a little train, but no similar success fuels Raeside's vehicle.

These four stories are transparently simple and at times derivative. Their chief strength lies in the droll rhythms, and the uncomplicated whimsicality that each illustrated text enshrines.

NOTES

¹"The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts* (London: Edwin Dalton, 1908), pp. 321, 319.

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