

Ruth Weber Russell is a free-lance editor and writer who lives in Kitchener, Ontario. She has reviewed books for The North Bay Nugget and Books in Canada, and has an M.A. in English from the University of Toronto.



Puffins and Politics

SALLY SMITH

Puffin Rock, James Heneghan and Bruce McBay. Illus. by Vesna Krstanovich. The Book Society of Canada Limited, 1980. 103 pp., \$3.50 paper. ISBN 0-7725-5070-0.

Puffin Rock is a short children's adventure story comprised of pointed comments, lively characterizations and delightful black and white illustrations. Your eye is first attracted to the cover which shows a soft, realistic water colour of a lonely puffin waving goodbye as his friend flies out to sea. Around his neck is a brilliant red scarf, similar to those worn by WW I flying aces – a single dash of colour in a muted scene.

Lundigan Puffin is the first character we meet. He is young, shy, gentlemanly, cautious, and moderate, just as we might expect puffins to be. Lundigan, the reluctant hero of the tale, leaves his homeland to look for an answer to the problems of Puffin Rock. He enacts the age-old quest of youth for knowledge. Through his travels and search, Lundigan grows and matures, eventually returning to the rock with a new-found knowledge and assurance and a startling answer to his questions.

Puffins are depicted as pacifists by Heneghan and McBay, co-authors of the novel, and not only as pacifists, but prim and proper ones as well. The puffin character is gentle and meek, but persistent. This puffinly tone is conveyed by stiff overpoliteness and exact adherence to proper speech and of course it is emphasized by the tiny black and white frock-coated puffin figures themselves.

The authors depict various national personalities in bird form. They have

drawn Lundigan as Canadian. The bewigged form of Samuel B. Eagleton, the bald eagle, is easily recognized by the slow Southern drawl, the nickname of "Duke", and other characteristics suggesting a John Wayne persona. Perhaps we might attribute English characteristics to the Right Honorable Great White Owl. Mr. GWO (whom Duke renames "Windy") is a personification of his nickname – verbose, arrogant, and over-educated. Another obvious "birdification" is the Great Auk, an oriental bird, inscrutable, wisely full of obtuse sayings, and concerned about the welfare of his bird dominion.

All the characters have in common their gentleness and pacifism. Eagles and owls are, in reality, birds of prey, but in *Puffin Rock* they are as physically gentle as the puffins. Perhaps the authors are suggesting by this that, as the world daily heaps more problems upon itself, only by gentleness and by living harmoniously in a hugely divided planet can we survive. "United we stand, divided we fall." It has also been said that the meek shall inherit the earth, and so in the end of the story the puffins do find a genuinely surprising solution for the problems of Puffin Rock. It could only happen in a fantasy . . . more's the pity!

Puffin Rock manages in a very short space to comment on most of the timely issues of our world community today. The first page or two alerts us to the problem of the puffin colony – a combined menace of pollution and over-population. Certainly, by allowing the seagulls to move into puffin territory, waters are cleaned of garbage since seagulls are garbage eaters; but although the gulls clean up the sea, the puffins in return must allow them the use of Puffin Rock as a home base. The puffins consequently are being forced from their rock into ultimate death in the sea.

Here in a nutshell, Heneghan and McBay have touched upon pollution of the sea, overhead noise pollution, oil slicks, over-population, homelessness, starvation, and the thorny subject of minority rights. They don't suggest solutions for the problems; they merely touch upon the perplexities so gently that they loom in the reader's mind. The conclusion of the story is depicted with such winsomeness that we sigh, "If only it could be!"

These weightier problems of pollution and homelessness, although not quickly solvable, serve as background for the acerbic comments passed by the authors on the more easily solvable problems in our society. Education – mainstreaming in particular – is greatly ridiculed. Professor Englebert J. Humperthinc is spotlighted in a vain attempt to teach squirrels to swim and ducks to climb. "Equal opportunity for everyone", he shouts, "is the key to an egalitarian education."

The authors go on to spoof and ridicule politicians and parliament. Simply and devastatingly they name two parliaments: the Puffinguff and the Beaverrap. At one time Sir Warbleberry Wood-Pecker, senator, is

Chairspeak of the Beaverrap. During his term, he decrees that parliament should sit atop the tallest pine tree in the forest. This necessitates a ground rule that each and every member (beavers, gophers, frogs, snakes, turtles, etc.) must learn to fly. After Sir W. is impeached, Wendell Weaseltongue takes his place.

Heneghan and McBay also comment indirectly on marriage, sex-stereotypes, and old age. They offer a satiric solution to quick marriages. The authors' feelings about sex stereotypes are succinctly illustrated in Lundigan's fiancée, Penelope Puffin. Penelope does *not* do typically female things. She is a member of the Puffinguff parliament and because of her excessively reasonable and logical nature she has made a name for herself. She is a university graduate and Lundigan would be the first one to say that she is smarter than he – if anyone ever asked. Penelope is what the '70s female generation has aspired to and what the '80s generation may fulfil. She can equally take her place as a poised, efficient participant in the Puffinguff, or as a fetching female in her relationship with Lundigan.

None of the male characters in *Puffin Rock* come across as *macho*, except in one instance. Lundigan lands one night in a rat's nest. We are taken back to the gum-chewing, jiving, saddleshoes and bobby-socks days of the '50s where the male rats are hip and uncouth and the female rats utter witless "ooh's" and "aah's."

Our youth-oriented world sometimes takes lightly the wisdom of age. Heneghan and McBay indicate their opinion that old age is not synonymous with senility: Lundigan, with an unsolvable problem, immediately heads for the two oldest fellows he knows, the Venerable Puffin and the Great Auk.

Puffin Rock does not just display characters and present social comments; it also includes a thread of mystery, various allusions to other children's tales and lots of flying time to think.

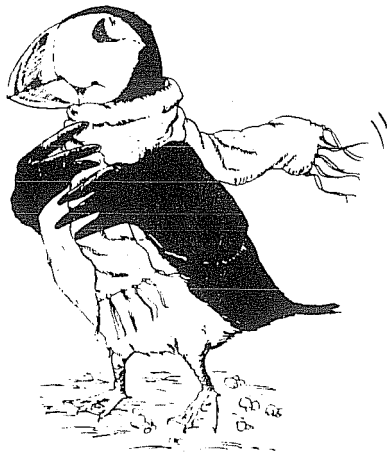
As for mystery: All the animals know of Lundigan's journey, but none know *how* they know. Lundigan finally discovers the *how* on the subterranean home of the Great Auk.

As for allusions: Lundigan's comment of "stranger and stranger" brings to mind Alice's "curiouser and curiouser"; there is a brief reference to Jonathan Livingston Seagull – "But then again, what can you expect from someone who is always talking about freedom and being different from the flock?"; and finally, the bare bones of the story, about three companions flying together seeking knowledge from one wiser, suggest Dorothy and her friends, off to see the wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Time to think: Most children's novels never touch on thinking or on the importance of having time to oneself to re-live warm memories or to think about the future. Lundigan does his thinking as he flies and these interludes

foreshadow future happenings or flash back to past ones.

The illustrations are marvellous. Favorites are Lundigan, Duke, the gopher in a wetsuit, and Bruce Goose. Each chapter is also heralded by a number of Lundigans marching across the top, the number equalling the number of the chapter.



1. Lundigan Puffin.



2. The gopher in a wetsuit.

Boys and girls in junior grades will find adventure, some mystery, and lots of humour in *Puffin Rock*. The writing is concise and simple. Children will enjoy and learn from Lundigan, as he grows from a hesitant youth to a boldly brave young adult.

Sally Smith, a freelance writer and mother of two children, lives in Ottawa.

