

# Classic Allegory Retold

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*Fox Mykyta*, Ivan Franko, trans. by Bohdan Melnyk. Illus. by William Kurelek. Tundra Books, 1978. 148 pp. \$12.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88776-112-7.

Readers of *Fox Mykyta*, the first English version of Ukrainian author Ivan Franko's 1890 classic folkloric tale about a charming trickster, will find it a pleasure to see a Canadian press taking the initiative to introduce a children's book of international stature to our younger audiences. The book's colorful attractively designed cover flap tells us: "*Lys Mykyta* is one of the *best of the best* children's books of the world, listed by the International Youth Library, Munich, and heads every list of the best of Ukrainian literature for both adults and children." Translated by Bohdan Melnyk and illustrated by the well-known, now deceased, artist of the same ethnic origin, William Kurelek (1927-1977), *Fox Mykyta* not only appears in a highly attractive design format, but also captures the rhythm of folk language and the pithiness of the moral proverb.

The story itself, as the translator makes clear in an epigraph, is a tale of bestial human qualities which are allegorized. Beasts who outwardly prowl the territory of the Russian Ukraine also prowl the inner kingdom of the human heart. *Fox Mykyta* is thus a moral allegory in the vein of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Now, take a very careful look  
While reading this amusing book:  
You'll recognize that some of them  
Have qualities we all condemn,  
Like spite, hypocrisy and greed.  
But who are they, these beasts indeed?  
The answer is not hard to find,  
Just keep the following in mind:  
Behind each beast, whate'er its race,  
There always hides a human face.  
It is, therefore, a human tale  
Wrapped in an allegoric veil.

The plot moves simply and suspensefully until the twelfth chapter in which the climax occurs and the main point of the narrative is expressed: "When tolerance and reason reign, / Then life for all is sweet again." "The

forest community” of diverse animals in the kingdom of King Lion Tsar Lev has been called to a convocation in the capital city of Lionburg. They have been perpetuating injustices against one another; the general court order summons them to give account of their grievances and to re-establish justice. The one who refuses to come is Fox Mykyta who, after many aborted attempts to bring him to the court, finally comes and gives the king and assembled accusers his defense.

He is accused of continually playing “mean tricks” on the other beasts; he is a cheat, liar, and trickster who ridicules others and laughs at their misfortunes. However, as he argues eloquently in his self-defense, it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Even the king, who is supposed to represent royal impartiality, maintains “might is right!”

The whole point of this elaborately told tale is, of course, that the Fox takes advantage of others’ innate weaknesses, and makes them comply in their undoing. They accuse him of evil-doing – rightly – but they too are guilty. He functions psychologically as a heightener of consciousness. He is, alchemically-speaking, the Mercurius. Like quick-silver, he eludes grasping, yet involves others in a quest to pin him down, and in so doing he leads them in the end to self-knowledge. His designations as a “cunning beast” and “a highly intelligent schemer” further accentuate the elusive psychic quality he represents in theriomorphic form. As in Buddhist literature, the Fox stands for the intuitive rather than the rational mind.

At the conclusion of the story, Mykyta escapes hanging and all the beasts agree to “forgive and forget” and to work for the entire State’s welfare, rather than for their own separate selfish purposes. This point no doubt illustrates the author’s own socialist perspective on community life. His function well performed, Fox is pardoned by the King Tsar Lev, and makes a dramatic but light-hearted exit:

The story ends. As Fox takes leave,  
He wipes his eyes upon his sleeve  
And says to those who read this tale:  
“May you be happy, free from woes!  
And as for your relentless foes  
May all their plots against you fall!”

Because of its considerably advanced moral perspective and subtle allegorical style, as well as its long series of semi-violent adventures and legalistic debates, this book would probably appeal to older children, at least eight years of age and upwards, as well as to adults. The artistic component of the book, however, is readily accessible to all ages, and Kurelek’s black charcoal sketches bring the sober allegory to life, visually adding the necessary humorous touches.

*Fox Mykyta* makes serious demands on its reader or listener; because of its length, it demands a well-developed concentration span. Moreover, its serious social message, its use of satire, irony, wit, and caricature, may be

missed by all but the more mature reader. There is an aspect of black humour here that emerges through the use of slapstick tricks played by Fox, a humour which warns us grimly that the world is full of trickery and meanness; that no one has pity on others; that people beat and abuse each other, and enjoy catching their victims off guard. In sum, it shows life as a bestial business – unless, of course, rational behaviour takes over. For these reasons, I believe that this book is *not* suitable for younger and impressionable children who may not be able to make the fine discriminations the author's thematic purpose demands.

*Fox Mykyta* is, nonetheless, an extremely appealing book, one of thematic and artistic substance, not to be lightly or easily read and dismissed. It calls for serious reflection and presents the reader with moral challenges to his psychological development and social responsibility. It is a book that would make a lasting gift because of its classic content. It will remain eminently re-readable. Certainly it is not for throw-away tastes. One feels the artistic solidity of the group effort that went into presenting it to us in this modern format. Recommended for *connaisseurs!*

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PAUL BLETON

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