

## FROM THE SAHARA TO ACADIA: UNIVERSAL FRIENDSHIP

*Christopher Cartier of Hazelnut, also known as Bear*, Antonine Maillet. Trans. Wayne Grady. Methuen, 1984. 76 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-458-98110-9.

How far is it from the Sahara to Acadia? Not very, if you juxtapose *The Little Prince* and *Christopher Cartier of Hazelnut, also known as Bear*. Most of the same themes are here: the delicacy of friendship, the love of life and Nature, the search for permanence in a time-bound world, the bittersweet nostalgia in remembering things past.

The narrator, keeper of a disused lighthouse, encounters a bear cub whose name is the book's title and the two become fast friends until, like the Little Prince, Christopher Cartier leaves the narrator to reminisce.

The characterization of "Bear" is extremely well done. We see a proud but naive little creature, childlike in his simplicity and aspirations, thoroughly lovable in his vitality and vulnerability. The novel is really one of apprenticeship: a rollicking adventure with the bees supplies Bear with much needed knowledge for his adulthood; he realizes the virtues of caring for someone else in his cultivation of the daisies.

Not quite so successful is the self-delineation of the narrator who, like the aviator in *The Little Prince*, Barrie in *Peter Pan* or Tolkien in *The Hobbit*, tends, at times, to presume too cosy a relationship between narrator and reader.

Throughout, we get a lively picture of Acadian seascape. Lighthouse, seagulls, and ocean are very much in evidence; yet, the natural imagery merges with the symbolic like the Little Prince's stars, rose, and sacrificial water. St-Exupéry's suggestion that all nature becomes imaginatively more beautiful through friendship is also crucial to Maillet: the pebbles on the beach become rubies; the out-of-service lighthouse becomes functional once more.

Antonine Maillet's style is both colloquial and poetic. Throughout, there is a keen sense of word-play (infrared-Winifred, metaphor-meteor) and the gusto of the prose rhythms amply match the Acadian *joie de vivre*, which is at the heart of the book.

Like *The Little Prince*, *Christopher Cartier* is really for all ages. The funny adventures of the bear cub should appeal to most youngsters, while the sensitively portrayed emotional states will reach the most unsentimental adults.

With all these similarities, one is tempted to ask, "Why, then, write another *Little Prince*?" The truth, of course, is that Bear is *not* the Little Prince; he is, as Maillet says, "struggling against Nature to make a personality, a constitution, a physiognomy that [is] absolutely, quintessentially Bear" (p. 48). The fact that Bear can be "unique in all the world" and survive comparison with the Little Prince says a great deal about the universality of childhood friendship.

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