

concerned about the author's lapses, while non-Jews likely will acquire insight into culture clash and the impact of one value system on another in everyday situations with new and first generation Canadians.

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Seasonal Highs and Lows

Jenny and the Hanukkah Queen. Jean Little. Illus. Suzanne Mogensen. Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1995. 32 pp. \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-85268-6. *Mouse in the Manger.* Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Elaine Blier. Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1995. 32 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-054971-4. *Merlin's Castle.* László Gál. Stoddart Publishing, 1995. 32 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2852-X. *Woodland Christmas.* Frances Tyrrell. North Winds Press, 1995. 32 pp. \$16.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24430-2. *Follow That Star.* Kenneth Oppel. Illus. Kim LaFave. Kids Can Press Ltd, 1994. Unpag. \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-134-9.

Seasonal books can, obviously, celebrate an event. They can also illuminate our traditions, give them some perspective, and create new aspects to those traditions. Such, then, is the challenge for the author and illustrator: to create something new, yet reflect the timeless quality of the celebration; perhaps even to create something that explains the celebration to not only those in the community but also to those in other communities, something that may draw us together in our newfound understanding of each other.

In *Jenny and the Hanukkah Queen*, Jenny's Jewish family responds to the overwhelming presence of Santa Claus during the holiday season by inventing the Hanukkah Queen. This charming book began its life as Michele Landsberg's true family story (as told to Jean Little). The question the book raises is when does a good family story become a good story for everyone? At what point does the weight of the storyteller's voice influence our beliefs? Will Jewish children believe they've missed something if they don't know about the Hanukkah Queen? And will children of other faiths grow up believing that the Hanukkah Queen is, and always has been, a part of the celebration of Hanukkah?

In attempting to provide Jenny with some "new" element to inform her struggle with the concept of Santa Claus, the story comes perilously close to diminishing Jenny's family's own holiday. There are aspects of Hanukkah that are as equally wonderful as anything Christmas can offer, including Santa Claus. Appropriating an image from Christmas leads to a homogenization of cultures, of beliefs, of celebrations. Rather than celebrating our diversity, it just serves to make us all the same.

In *Mouse in the Manger*, elements in both the text and the illustrations work to undermine the tension in Mouse's story. The illustrations are reminiscent of old Christmas cards, slightly garish in their use of red, green, and other



bright, bold colours. Somehow, though, this is not comforting, like remembering past Christmases with some measure of fondness; instead, it distances us from the emotion of the story. The circular frames of the illustrations restrain the story, contain the tension: they imply safety and comfort, thus diminishing our belief in Mouse's plight. Short choppy sentences, reminiscent of the text found in primers, further remove any interest. Rather than making it a small, gentle tale, the clipped rhythm of the writing results in extremely flat, static text.

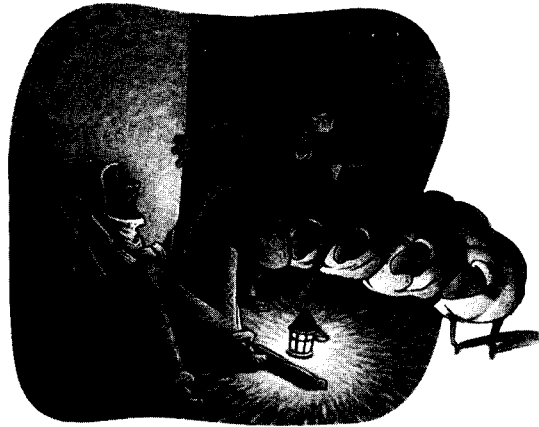
The story of *Merlin's Castle* is problematic from beginning to end. In fact, there are far too many stories going on at once here, and the attempt to place them in the form of a circular tale fails. Here, the circle is broken — Gál's ending doesn't send the reader back to the beginning, thus discouraging the reader from rereading to appreciate the circular nature of the story. As well, the illustrations are oddly flat, creating neither emotional response nor interest.



Finally, many elements of the story are highly distracting: Donatello functions as either an obscure art reference or as a confusing pop culture reference (will readers question the fact that Donatello is a lizard, when he really should be a Ninja Turtle?); and Merlin, whose archetypal presence carries great weight, is reduced to a mere plot device. All of this plot hangs on a very flimsy thread, and the thread frays quickly.



In *Woodland Christmas*, Frances Tyrrell transforms existing tradition, in the form of a well-known Christmas carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." In fact, Tyrrell changes not one word: what she does is to take a carol that has no specified setting, and to give it one through the illustrations. The beauty of the woodland setting is recreated through the illustrations, which show us the courtship and wedding of two bears. This is a world of magic and fancy, with skating bears and birds, the shape of the five golden rings reflected in the circular swimming of five playful otters. The illustrations are held in place and time by a frame of frost and snowflakes. In *Mouse in the Manger*, this framing technique distanced the reader from Mouse's story; however, in *Woodland Christmas*, this effect leaves us with the impression of seeing the story through a window, places it in a time and place which is rich in detail without restricting us to what is true about the woodland world. Tyrrell anchors her story in the words of the carol, unchanged, and timeless. The book allows those of us who live in a woodland area to revel in our traditions of Christmas in our own place; it also allows others, in other places, to look through this frosted window, to learn what the woodland is like in winter.



Kenneth Oppel takes perhaps the greatest leap of all in *Follow That Star*. The book takes its inspiration from a familiar Biblical passage. How then, to make this story fresh, to make it different, without having the story pale by comparison to the original? First, Oppel creates a character who immediately captures the reader's interest. Zach is a shepherd devoted to his sheep; although he grumbles, he will not neglect them. Ever practical, he dismisses the possibility of angels, but is revealed to us as a man of faith and imagination from his first sighting of angel mist.

Oppel's tale resonates with timeless, almost archetypal elements: the Good Samaritan, who helps the stranger at the side of the road; the carpenter who helps Zach build a bridge, is perhaps, a hint of the carpenter that Zach will find in Bethlehem; the stranger who helps Zach "sling-shot" his sheep up the hill is most certainly David.

The illustrations, by Kim LaFave, are stunning. Deep blues and purples of the countryside at night are contrasted by the light of the figures: most characters appear gold, as if they are infused with the light, indeed the spirit of that star. Light spills out of lanterns, out of the faces of the sheep, out of the characters themselves. Note that the first time that we see Zach, he doesn't glow like this: only when he comes into contact with the angel mist does his figure become infused with this golden light. And only when he remains in contact with the various angels does he remain in this glow. In the final image of Zach, his face glows with the light of the star as he realizes he must follow it to the stable. This is a subtle yet effective technique.

Follow That Star relies on our knowledge of this age-old tale, on elements already strong in our psyches, such as images of shepherds, of starlight, of angels which inform our understanding of the Christmas story. Like all effective seasonal books should, *Follow That Star* expands on this knowledge, thus creating something new and wondrous out of something old and wondrous.

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