

A Stylish Experiment in Myth Making

Kalifax. Duncan Thornton. Coteau, 1999. 168 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-152-6.

Advertised in the publisher's release as "the first step in a campaign to mythologize Canada and its history," Duncan Thornton's *Kalifax* blends survival adventure, traveller's tall tale, and symbolic fairy tale. At various points it faintly echoes works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Hans Christian Andersen, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Kingsley. Although *Kalifax* depends on a plot pattern all of these writers employed, the journey to the perilous realm, Thornton's focus is less on individual heroism than on the power of story itself.

As an adventure, *Kalifax* relies on a disappointing *deus ex machina*. The protagonist, young Tom, accompanies the crew of the Volantix on a quest for a northern passage to the tropics. When the ship becomes ice locked, the crew suffers from the cold and a fierce attack by snow-goblins. Tom, feeling guilty for his cowardice during the goblin attack, decides to seek help. Like Stevenson's Jim Hawkins, he therefore disobeys orders, setting out alone. Fortunately, Grandfather Frost, a combination of Lewis's Father Christmas and Tolkien's shape-shifter Beorn, rescues the exhausted Tom and then the crew. Before sending them on their way in the spring, he gives the ship's captain and Tom gifts of items they once lost and a vision of the Queen of the Hall of the Stars, a divine presence reminiscent of MacDonald's Grandmother Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*.

The deliberately poetic style and the fact that most characters are unnamed emphasize the text's status as artifice, not a history, requiring a willing suspension of disbelief. Perhaps these devices are meant to emphasize the dominant theme, the power of story. This theme appears, for example, when Tom incites the crew to join the voyage by telling of how a magic torch named Kalifax saved two elves lost in the north, when he abandons ship because he believes that he is the crew's Kalifax, and when a sailor warms the shivering crew by telling about the tropics. Grandfather Frost implies that stories preserve truth, saying the elves live only in them, and that faith in stories is essential, but his explanation is not thorough enough to form the thematic centre. The novel has a related weakness: the magical torch, the mysterious divine Queen, and the lost items that Grandfather Frost returns require more elaboration if the novel is actually to have the profundity towards which it ineffectively strains.

Unfortunately, Thornton has produced an experiment instead of a poetic myth. An interesting style cannot compensate for weaknesses of substance; *Kalifax* is stiff and pretentious.

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