

## The Curse of the Dragon

*The Smugglers*. Iain Lawrence. Delacorte, 1999. 183 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-32663-7.

"Stay clear of that ship, *The Dragon*," mutters the mysterious stranger who shares John Spencer's coach as he and his father make their way to Pegwell Bay to buy the schooner. "She's bad luck. No, she's worse than that. She's evil." And so begins one of the finest action stories I have read since Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver scared and thrilled me to the bone.

"At the time this story is set," writes Lawrence in an afternote, "the start of the nineteenth century, a smuggling run [in England] would draw farmhands from their fields, blacksmiths from their forges, and bakers from their ovens. They would show up for a night of work and go back to their jobs in the daylight. At dawn the farmer might find his horse with muddied hooves, but there would be a keg of brandy beside the stable door. And he would take his payment and look the other way; the smuggling gangs were known for their violence, and it was better not to cross them."

But cross them is what John Spencer does, often unwittingly, as he attempts (with his makeshift crew who are themselves the smugglers) to foil the smugglers when he tries to sail his new, "blood-christened" schooner back to London. Seemingly cursed, captained by an unscrupulous adventurer (one minute all smiles, the next with a knife at your throat), with smuggling ingrained in her timbers, *The Dragon* takes John Spencer on a frightening trip across the English Channel and back, with many close encounters with death from both the smugglers themselves and the revenue-men he is trying to contact.

On an experiential level, the novel is exceptional. There are thrills at every turn of the tide, suspense enough to satisfy the most fastidious fan, and even a touch of romance at the end. A masterful storyteller, Lawrence not only weaves a suspenseful plot, but he manages to create tension, mystery, and action in the prose itself. Take this example, as *The Dragon* tries to outrun the king's cutter in a fog: "We turned to port, then hard to starboard. We ran with the jib aback, and we jibed across the wind, and the compass spun like a whirligig. The fog fiddled with my senses; I stared wildly at things that weren't there. Flotillas of fantastic ships, enormous faces, and even ladies walking on the water came and went on every side. But I could hear the cutter, the slap of water at her hull, the flapping of her sails." For early teen readers craving sheer excitement, *The Smugglers* will be a *pièce de résistance*.

However, lest it be assumed that this is a purely visceral novel, let me assure you it is not. The characters are original and multi-faceted: the sinister Captain Crowe, beset by fears and superstitions; the bluff but dashing Tommy Dusker, part-time highwayman, part-time smuggler, who wears a vest of corks because he is afraid of the water; and the blind Mrs. Pye, waiting for her long-lost husband — they fascinate and beguile and are never comic-book stereotypes. The dialogue is rich and robust, full of startling similes and sailing metaphors:

And so *The Dragon* went to sea, with a skirl of pipes in a ghostly breeze. The drifting dunes of the Goodwin Sands went by to port, the shores of Kent to starboard, and I alone steered the ship, this little world of ours. The

square topsail flapped and filled, and I felt the pulse of the Dragon through the wheel as she quickened on her way.

But soon Dasher took my place. "You can go," he said. "I'll steer this thing. What's the course?"

"Running free," said I.

"Running free," he answered with a nod. "Straight ahead. Steady as she goes." He wore an impish grin. "Lord love me, I like this sailor talk."

And so will all who read this wonderful, exciting novel.

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### The Power of Vulnerability

*Emma's Eggs*. Margriet Ruurs. Illus. Barbara Spurll. Stoddart, 1996. 24 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2972-0. *Wherever Bears Be*. Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. Arden Johnson. Tradewind, 1999. 32 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-896580-18-1. *Omar on Ice*. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-507-7. *Weighing the Elephant*. Ting-xing Ye. Illus. Suzane Langlois. Annick, 1998. 30 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-527-X. *Dume's Roar*. Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. Kathy Blankley Roman. Stoddart, 1997. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3003-6. *Kitoto the Mighty*. Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. Kristi Frost. Stoddart, 1998. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3019-2.

Young children live in a world in which they often feel small, overlooked, or misunderstood by dictatorial adults towering over them. Not surprisingly, these young persons identify with stories in which vulnerable characters discover hidden strengths and consequently earn respect. The following animal fables and fairy tales serve as richly suggestive metaphors that allow their young audience a creative reinterpretation of their own experiences.

In Margriet Ruurs's *Emma's Eggs*, the above themes are exemplified by a young hen who tries very hard to please the farmer's family, whether by boiling, scrambling, or painting her freshly laid eggs. When the farmers are not pleased at all, the irritated hen keeps her next egg to herself, only to discover soon that a young chicken is hatching. For once, the farmers are happy: "That is what you do with eggs!" While the focus on pleasing others may seem somewhat obsessive, the repeated trials and errors are very comical. Barbara Spurll's colourful illustrations, particularly the expressive physiognomy of the hen and the happy new chick, provide much opportunity for identification.

Similarly, Omar, the delightful chubby little bear in Maryann Kovalski's *Omar on Ice*, is unhappy when the art teacher at bear school mistakes Omar's first portrait of his mother for a rock. Dejected, he sits on the side as the class goes skating. However, they skate poorly, prompting Omar, a natural on ice, to a demonstration. With elegant ease, he skates forwards, backwards, and in circles, his lines creating