

Tall in the Saddle. Anne Carter. Illus. David McPhail. Orca, 1999. 27 pp. \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-154-8.

Tall in the Saddle is a charming but unsentimental book, a gentle cowboy fantasy conjured up for a child to enter into. In this, her first children's picture book, Carter writes a bare-bones daydream about a little boy and his father as they play at being cowboys. Gently she pulls the bikes into horses and provides a few simple details: "Dad ties a red bandana to keep the dust off his face." Together, the father and son outwit some cattle rustlers, but that is not the plot: this book is clearly less a story than a suggestion for play. *Tall in the Saddle* will, of course, appeal only to young children (one to three years of age) who want little more than clear but detailed pictures and lyrical, repetitive narration, but these it provides rather well. Filling the pages for the very young, illustrator McPhail wisely has the boy mounted on a tricycle, and there are plenty of richly-toned water-colour animals wandering through the book's pages. The two cowboys play pretty fast and loose with the law, which is why this effort stops short of being saccharine, and the morning to evening span of the father-and-son adventure sets just the right tone for bedtime.

Tabatha Southey is a freelance writer who contributes frequently to the *National Post*. She is also the author of *The Deep Cold River Story*, published by Key Porter Books.

I Know an Old Laddie. Jean Little. Illus. Rose Cowles. Viking, 1999. 29 pp. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-6070-8808-5.

Although her books usually cater to an older crowd, this new book by the immensely successful author Jean Little offers all the comfort of the familiar "I Know an old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly," with a twist that works wonders with the very young. Her exuberant version of the classic rhythm features an old "laddie" with an even more eclectic palate than that possessed by the poem's original heroine. Only Little, always an inspiration, has the literary courage to rhyme "awesome" and "possum." For its true merits to be understood, this is one of those books that has to be read out loud to a child, or, better still, to a group of children, since this is certainly a perfect nursery to senior kindergarten classroom book. To a four-year-old, funnier than the words themselves will likely be watching the grown-up struggle to make the poem work:

I know an old laddie who swallowed a wapiti.
Hippity-hoppity, down went the wapiti.
He swallowed the wapiti to catch the stork.
With stainless steel fork, he stuffed in a stork.

At first glance this rather difficult verse might appear to be a weakness in the book, but all of those personal appearances Little has made over the years have certainly paid off: she knows for whom she writes, and the children to whom I read *I Know an Old Laddie* enjoyed these tricky verses the most. Perhaps combined with the bright but not garish illustrations by Rose Cowles, the book is a little too giddy for bed-

time, but it's a quirky little book that will certainly hold its audience from page one through to the ultimately indigestible squid at the end.

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Sea Change. Linda Smith. Thistledown, 1999. 328 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-86-3.

The second novel in the Freyan trilogy, *Sea Change* is a thoroughly enjoyable, fast-paced yet thoughtful fantasy novel for the early to mid teens. Even though it is the second in a trilogy, it is complete enough in itself that the reader need not have read the first installment, *Wind Shifter*, to enjoy it.

The story centres on Kerstin Speller, a sixteen-year-old apprentice wizard who travels with her wizard father, Morgan, and another wizard to an unexplored part of their world, where only nine women carry all the magical powers that help their society. Kerstin and the two older wizards hope to learn healing from them but, during their stay, Morgan and the Healer fall in love while Kerstin discovers a boy with magical talent. These discoveries disrupt all their lives.

Smith uses this fast-paced novel as a vehicle through which to explore gender roles and the restrictions placed on both genders by their respective societies. Kerstin is considered unusual in her role as apprentice because girls in Freya usually do nothing outside the home. In contrast, on Islandia it is the men who are considered incapable of magic and, while the men have jobs and civic roles, women do as well. Smith cleverly shows the restrictions placed on both genders by gender role expectations and limitations, not only through Kerstin but particularly through her discovery of Raven, the boy with a powerful but unacceptable gift of healing.

Yet there is nothing preachy in Smith's tone. She works this theme neatly through character, setting, and plot, so that, while her point is obvious, it is a natural outcome of the elements of the novel, not forced or strident. Her characters are very strong. Kerstin herself is intelligent, stubborn, and strong-willed, while still having the uncertainties and longings of adolescence, including the longing for her widowed father's undivided attention. The tormented Raven, while a more background figure, evokes intense sympathy in the reader, as does Morgan with his loneliness which his daughter cannot completely fill, the Animal Helper, Gilles, with her bitterness and Rilka, the Healer, with her sweet gentleness and subtle strength. Smith's greatest strength seems to be in her characters, and yet other parts of the novel do not show weakness. The plot is well crafted, with no lag in the action and yet plenty of time for the reader to take in the strangeness of the setting, the differences of the characters, and the intensity of the themes woven through the story.

Overall, this excellent young adult fantasy is extremely well written and a thoroughly enjoyable read. We have every reason to look forward to the third volume of the Freyan trilogy.

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