

trying to figure themselves out) come to believe that certain actions, themes in the sketches, are actually how the world works, and not an indication of specific problems, even obsessions, of an author? Some simple editing to eliminate the intrusive narrators and reforming of the tales into historical fiction would go a long way in turning adult nostalgia into young adult literature.

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Finding Meaning in Unfamiliar Worlds / Hilary Turner

The Maze. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 2002. 183 pp. \$15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639213-X.

Jonathan Dreamed of Dragons, Book II: The Return of Ozon. Gordon A. Francis. ESP, 2001. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-9685004-7-1.

The Dollmage. Martine Leavitt. Red Deer, 2001. 159 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-233-7.

The Phantom Queen. Ven Beemudré. Coteau, 2002. 292 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-200-X.

Fire Drake. Ann Ewan. ThistleDown, 2002. 516 pp. Price unlisted. Paper. ISBN 1-894345-45-2.

Using the conventional distinction between “domestic” and “high” fantasy, it is possible to divide these five books into two discrete categories. In the first, journeys take place between our world and another, and the central characters are ordinary people just like us; their familiarity enables them to function as substitutes and guides for the reader. The experiences of these characters in the alien setting serve primarily to teach them valuable lessons about life in this world. The journey is usually a secret journey, often symbolic of a voyage of discovery within the self, or an analogue of growing up. Monica Hughes in *The Maze* and Gordon A. Francis in *Jonathan Dreamed of Dragons: The Return of Ozon* have produced examples of this type. The second category, which to my mind demands more artistry and control, is the fantasy novel that creates a consistent and self-contained world, ostensibly unrelated to the one that the reader inhabits. In books of this sort, the centre of interest is the fantasy world itself: its history, its culture, its depth and intricacy, and all the governing assumptions, properties, and rules that Perry Nodelman has called “metaphysical” (175). If these happen to be reminiscent of their counterparts in our world and if they constitute an implicit comment or critique, so much the better. The reader is not pressed — but merely permitted — to transfer moral insights

from one realm to the other. In this second category, I would place *The Dollmage* by Martine Leavitt, *The Phantom Queen* by Ven Beemudré, and *Firedrake* by Ann Ewan.

With the death of Monica Hughes in March 2003, Canadian children's writing sustained a severe loss. Hughes was both prolific and original; she had a large and loyal following, at least partly because of her gift for transposing familiar problems to unusual settings so as to examine them with fresh eyes. *The Maze* is an example of the technique at its most effective. Though the book is short, the real-world frame around the fantasy adventure is detailed and interesting in its own right. 15-year-old Andrea's parents have separated, and she and her overbearing father have moved to another part of town. The move entails new housekeeping responsibilities and a new school for Andrea — a school where a gang of bullies further erodes her confidence and peace of mind. Much of the novel is devoted to Andrea's mounting desperation as the strategies she uses to evade her enemies seem only to make matters worse.

Wishing for a magic amulet to whisk her away from her troubles, Andrea instead is given a miniature box-like object with an inlaid silver maze. In a trance-like state one evening, she finds that she is able to enter and exit the maze at will. The next day, however, in the middle of a vicious attack, two of the bullies find themselves sucked into the box. Unlike Andrea, they remain trapped within, condemned to blunder through a bizarre alien landscape whose physical features mirror their inner fears, conflicts, and rage. Suddenly finding herself under suspicion for the disappearance of Crystal and Sabrina, Andrea assumes the responsibility of rescuing her tormentors.

The maze, we discover, is a simulacrum of reality. Not only do its contours and properties reflect the emotional state of whoever is inside, but the psychological dynamic between its occupants is symbolically replicated as well. Thus, in a series of surreal locales, Andrea finds herself negotiating a new kind of relationship with Crystal, the leader of the gang. Because the maze belongs to Andrea, this can be done on Andrea's terms; but the task is still far from easy. Hughes's analysis of the psychology of the bully — and of the chronic tug-of-war between anger and vulnerability that many adolescents experience — is sensitive and clear. Her portrayal of the self-contained world of the maze as a sort of "safe space" for psychological trial and error is also well executed.

However, the structure of the book is made somewhat ungainly by Hughes's handling of the time sequence. Events within the maze seem to have taken no time at all in the real world, and the participants have only a foggy recollection of what has happened. This quirk necessitates the repetition in the frame story of things already accomplished inside the maze. Given that the lessons Andrea has learned also have a significant impact on her relations with both her estranged parents, and since these must be revisited as well, the ending of the story feels heavy and redundant.

Jonathan Dreamed of Dragons: The Return of Ozon, the second book in a series by Newfoundland writer and teacher Gordon A. Francis, is intended for much younger children and (one suspects) designed for use in a classroom setting. A cautionary tale about the dangers of environmental pollution, the book makes use of the traditional quest narrative — with various improbable, though imaginative, complications. Jonathan and his friend Rhonda are summoned by the dragons of Elim, a distant planet. Riding a talking purple unicorn, the children journey to Elim where they are given the task of destroying the interplanetary monster Ozon, currently

gorging himself on the pollutants that have eaten away at Earth's ozone layer. The plan is to bombard Ozon from above with a quasi-scientific, quasi-magical potion. The impact will create a lot of smoke, which can then be filtered and cleansed; finally, the remaining ozone can be reintroduced into Earth's atmosphere and the human race saved from imminent destruction.

The wild ride that brings these marvels about is suspenseful and amusing, but the characterization and internal logic of the story are too thin to conceal its anxious didacticism. Adults are stereotyped as glib and unconcerned about the damage they are doing to the world. While thousands of dead fish float in the harbour, bureaucrats and politicians twiddle their thumbs. Jonathan and Rhonda, forbidden to discuss their magical journey, vow to become environmental scientists when they grow up. Episodes that might have been used to encourage a genuine interest in science are subsumed instead in a call to duty and good citizenship. Stylistically, too, the book is self-conscious and somewhat uneven. It seems unlikely, for example, that a dragon from another planet should quote Robert Frost, or that a unicorn who can fly at the speed of light and grant wishes should adopt the phrasing of a commercial airline, exclaiming "Hang on people; we are experiencing some turbulence." Francis's undoubted good intentions are not quite enough to keep his story out of the same difficulty.

Moving into the second category, we find a more consistently admirable group of texts, and strong evidence of the beginnings of a Canadian tradition in high fantasy. The mythological outlook of Martine Leavitt (formerly Martine Bates) is familiar to readers of her *Marmawell* trilogy (Red Deer Press, 1992-98). In this earlier series, the coming-of-age of the central character, Marwen, is accomplished in spite of her lack of a "weaving," the badge of identity and belonging that all members of the community are granted at birth. In similar fashion, the world of *The Dollmage* is controlled by the making and manipulation of dolls — miniature figures that can represent not only humans but animals, buildings, and natural settings. "No house is built in Seekvalley," says the Dollmage, "until it is first made here in miniature. No bridge is built until it is first fashioned for the village doll. I am the storymaker. I make the story of the village." The plot concerns the transfer of this mystical power from the aging seer, Hobblefoot, to a younger successor. Questions relating to identity, worthiness, and the grounds of membership in a community are again at the fore. But whereas the *Marmawell* novels were episodic and somewhat diffuse, *The Dollmage* is spare and concentrated. The story is told entirely in the words of the elderly Dollmage, whose unacknowledged pride and envy make the succession an agonizing business both for her and for the whole village of Seekvalley. Leavitt makes subtle use of first-person narration, showing the cruel distortions in perception caused by wishful thinking and egotism. Rather like C.S. Lewis's experiment with a self-incriminating narrator, *Till We Have Faces* (1956), the emphasis here falls as much on Hobblefoot's coming to terms with her own frailties as it does on the ruinous domino effect that occurs in a society where power is wielded without humility.

The structure of *The Dollmage* is mathematically precise, and the style is spare and direct. Binary pairs abound. In a village surrounded by four mountains, on the day designated to mark the birth of the new Dollmage, four children — two boys and two girls — are born. Since tradition dictates that there can be only one Dollmage, one of the girls is destined to inherit the title. The rivalry that is allowed to develop between Annakey and Renoa as they grow up is the mainspring of the

plot. Whereas the former is good-natured, industrious, and patient under misfortune, the latter is wilful, ingratiating, and self-centred. Both girls demonstrate a gift for magic and insight, and each individually has the ability to shape the village's story — though, oddly, their united powers are more effectual than what either can exhibit on her own. Hobblefoot has an ancient and groundless grudge against Annakey's mother, however, and covertly manoeuvres the girl into the role of village scapegoat. The more patiently Annakey responds to injustice, the more intense Hobblefoot's resentment becomes. As a decision about the succession grows more urgent, the pressure that is brought to bear on all the villagers erupts in quarrels, deceptions, a sexual assault, and a vicious attack from outside.

The outcome is disturbing in the sense that it reveals the power of unacknowledged hatred (especially when it masquerades as good intentions) to alter the course of public events. Leavitt expertly traces the incremental steps by which tiny prejudices and resentments become articles of belief that blind the holder to reality. Implicit also in the story is the limited power of virtuous people to protect themselves from the envy and insecurity of others. Underlying both these painful truths, however, is the sheer destructiveness of binary thinking. As the conflict is finally resolved — though not without a violent death — both the narrator and her community begin to see that choices may be made so as to include both elements in a pair. Achieving balance and synthesis, however, means keeping an open mind and renouncing the desire for control. As the Dollmage remarks with hindsight of her predicament, "Once again God had tricked me. We are friends that way."

Though stylistically very different, and a good deal more complicated, *The Phantom Queen* also exhibits a preoccupation with binary pairs and the evils of either / or thinking. The kingdom of Mir (the name suggests mirror) is divided in two from north to south by the River Reekha. At the centre of the kingdom is the island city of Goroth, home of the heads of both church and state. There Tsar Leo — the father of six daughters — scorning the advice of Bishop Tserkov, makes a deal with the devil for a son to inherit his throne. The devil keeps his part of the bargain, yet grants not one son but male twins — compounding rather than solving the problems of the kingdom. Ikar and Ivan, as they come of age, raise armies of followers and divide the kingdom into rival halves. Leo is devastated by their enmity and, on his deathbed, causes the palace to be razed, the bridges between the left and right banks of the Reekah destroyed, and the central island prohibited to all but the Bishop and his guests. The ensuing bloody battle between the rival princes is resolved only with magical intervention.

Wrapped around this mainly political narrative is the story of Nevsky, a seer, and a holy fool whose destiny it is to wrestle against the forces of disorder that threaten to overrun the kingdom. Originally an orphan and misfit named Sasha, he is transformed by a mystical experience in a forbidden cave at the source of the Nevar River, one of the streams that feed the Reekah. Nevsky and his familiar, an owl (originally the dog who saved him from a burning house), have many adventures among the both the peasantry and aristocracy of Mir. The cave that is the source of their mystical power plays an important role much later in the story when another child, a girl named Ekho who has been raised from infancy by Nevsky, also enters its fanged mouth only to discover another land within where all colours are the opposite of the colours in her world, and where singing unaccompanied is punishable by death. The knowledge and power she gains inside the cave supply the key to ending the dispute between the warring princes, and Ekho is the means by

which peace is restored. Though she loves Nevsky, and he her, Ekho departs in the end, sensing that her mystical gifts ought to be used for the good of those in need.

The narrative is further complicated by the fact that all the above is recounted by a blind minstrel who is visiting the court of the Phantom Queen. She is the beloved, but aging ruler of a land which appears to have no connection to Mir. From small clues embedded in the minstrel's story, however, it eventually becomes plain that the minstrel is Nevsky and that the Queen none other than his long-lost Ekho. Their reunion brings the many threads of the story together.

The Phantom Queen is a quirky book by any measure. Ven Beemudré (the author of two short story collections, a novella, and a young adult biography of Isaac Brock) acknowledges that he was "some twenty-four years, more off than on" in writing it — a circumstance which may account for the work's multiple layers of meaning, complex imagery, and interlocking settings. Though obviously indebted to Slavic folk tales, the kingdom of Mir is an original and richly detailed fantasy world. Black magic, mysticism, superstition, and the iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church coexist quite naturally within its borders. And, though a sunnier and more heterogeneous book than *The Dollmage*, it too offers compelling examples of the right and wrong uses of power.

Of these three, however, the most finely textured and carefully wrought example of high fantasy is *Firedrake*, the first work of fiction of Ann Ewan, a medievalist and a linguist. Set in the land of Redmetal (named for "rufer," the copper-like substance that is its principal resource), *Firedrake* portrays a rigidly hierarchical society — effectively, a tyranny — in which it is prophesied that a blind woman, a madman, and a wizard will together overthrow the regime and destroy its source of power. This source is the Firedrake itself, an entity created by the ruling class, the Arkanan. The Firedrake is part dragon, part wheel, and part wizard; in exchange for an endless supply of precious stones, it permits the Arkanan to rejuvenate themselves perpetually, thus ensuring their control of the land and people.

Though endowed with magical powers, the Arkanan do little themselves. Their henchmen are the Kunan Keir, also known as the Wolves, who function as paramilitary units, police, and traders for the precious stones demanded by the Firedrake. Below them are the Perinan, the common folk, whose freedom is compromised by the desperate need of the Arkanan to maintain control. Perin children, logically, are the source of new Wolves, and the more promising ones are frequently stolen, stripped of their identities, and trained as fighting machines.

The centre of interest in this brilliantly envisioned setting is Shan, a Wolf-in-training. Scorned by the other Cubs because of her short-sightedness, Shan is forced to survive by her wits and her tenacity. Circumstances lead her to seek friendship among the Perinan (strictly forbidden to Cubs), where she witnesses the rapacity and cruelty of their overlords. Her political consciousness develops further when she meets Deakin, a renegade Wolf, deranged by too many acts of compulsory violence, who helps her learn the skills necessary to surviving her induction to membership in the Kunan Keir. The half-blind Shan and the half-mad Deakin are eventually joined by the (slightly handicapped) wizard, Fletcher, and the conditions of the prophesy are satisfied. The story grows more and more gripping as the three make their way towards the heavily defended Firedrake.

It is impossible not to see something of a political allegory in this work. Ewan's understanding of the addictive quality of power is astute. As her omniscient narrator remarks, "once Arkanan had created the Firedrake, they found they were its

prisoners as well as its builders. They could not go too far from it or stay away too long or they would die. . . . They need the Firedrake and at the same time they fear it, and they also both need and fear the Kunan Keir." Ewan explores the complex economy that grows up around this uneasy master-slave relationship and the many ways in which the system affects the lives of individuals. She is equally convincing about the lengths to which a regime will go to preserve its hegemony. The murder of innocents, the brainwashing of defectors, the deliberate poisoning of the environment — all these applications of terror are examined with a cool and steady eye.

I hesitate, however, to label *Firedrake* a dystopian novel pure and simple. My reasoning is that the emphasis here falls not on the political conflicts within this society, credible as they are, but on their underlying psychological causes within individuals as well as corporate bodies. Thus, there is nothing dogmatic or fatalistic about the events of this story, nor is there even a whisper of fear that "it might happen here." The cause of tyranny among the Arkanan is fear. This is made especially clear when the most admirable of their number at last dissents, preferring her own death to the endless struggle to maintain power. And throughout *Redmetal*, as in any totalitarian state, those who are tyrannized adjust their lives to preserve what freedom they can. The Cubs, for example, have a secret system of hand signals that enables them to communicate in full view of their masters. The Perinans support a guerrilla band that launches periodic attacks on the regime. And the Wolves, though they cultivate an aura of impassive discipline, are in fact an army of ironists only too conscious of their divided loyalties. Although the struggle between good and evil is riveting, the reader's continual discovery of the more complex reality beneath appearances is still more so.

Firedrake is unusual in still another respect. This is the fashion in which a close relationship between an adolescent girl and two adult but unmarried men is portrayed without a hint of sexual tension. Not (to my knowledge) since Dorothy's journey to the Emerald City in the company of the Scarecrow and Tin Man has this kind of friendship been rendered with such insight and grace. Granted, one of the tests of admission to the Kunan Keir is successful passage through the "green wall," the ordeal by which lust is eliminated from the Cubs' emotional repertoire. Yet Ewan makes this plot device serve her well: because of it, Shan can be accepted on her merits by two seasoned warriors without the complications of sexuality. The true friendship that ensues among the partners does not preclude maternal feelings on her part, nor a protective impulse on the part of the two males. Yet their mutual trust and respect is the more powerful and meaningful because they have been equals throughout the quest. Shan's gradual discovery that adult males are sometimes vulnerable — and frequently at the mercy of their emotions — is one of the more compelling threads within this book.

All three of these examples of high fantasy, individual as they are, share some of the best qualities of the classic texts in the genre. Sheila Egoff has remarked on the capacity of this type of fiction to offer "a true reflection of reality and . . . to illuminate life's mysteries far beyond purportedly 'realistic' novels" (1). Chet Raymo has spoken of "the spooky sense of entwined order and chaos" (187) that one experiences in discovering an alien world. And Perry Nodelman, drawing the connection between fantasy literature and childhood itself, has spoken of its "ability to let us, as newcomers to the worlds it describes, experience innocence again" (178). The common feature of these descriptions, surely, is the reader's powerful conviction of the meaningfulness — psychological, spiritual, and rational — of the unfamiliar.

Presumably this is the most desirable effect to achieve in fiction of any kind; Leavitt, Beemudré, and Ewan have accomplished it with elegance and daring.

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In the First Person / Jason Nolan

Remembering Lucy Maud Montgomery. Alexandra Heilbron. Dundurn, 2001. 255 pp. \$26.99 paper. ISBN 1-55002-362-4.

With *Remembering Lucy Maud Montgomery*, Alexandra Heilbron has done a great service to readers and fans of L.M. Montgomery by interviewing so many individuals, many of whom are no longer with us, whose stories and reminiscences would otherwise be lost forever. It is a rare occurrence for an author to have a book of recollections written about her, especially 60 years after her death. It is a fun read and helps readers develop a broader understanding of one of Canada's most important writers. The stories Heilbron brings to us are delightful snapshots into the lives of those sharing their reminiscences and into the life of L.M. Montgomery, offering a perspective that only a few have had. Organized into five sections of interviews that focus on Montgomery as family member, employer, neighbour, teacher, and author as well as a section of selected newspaper and magazine articles about Montgomery published between 1909 and 1942, the book is the product of Heilbron's strong and abiding personal interest in the world of L.M. Montgomery.

The book suffers, however, from a number of defects that limit its value. Foremost is the absence of an apparatus that would make the book useful to scholars and researchers as well as more satisfying to the average reader. The reading experience would be enhanced by knowing more about where these stories come from, the milieu in which they exist, and who the interviewees are aside from their direct relationship with Montgomery. The introduction, woefully short and idiosyncratic, could have set the scene for the interviews and contextualized them within Montgomery's life and within her own life narrative, which includes accounts of some of the stories we are soon to find before us.