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Facing Fear

Dippers. Barbara Nichol. Illus. Barry Moser. Tundra, 1997. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8876-396-0.

In a time-honoured tradition, Barbara Nichol introduces her fantasy with evidence of its historical authenticity: the first item in the book appears to be a reproduction of a page taken from an old text. A drawing of a dipper — a winged slightly mole-like creature — is given a Latin-like title (*Icticyon celiosylvestris*), and beneath it appear three anatomical drawings of its head, brain and foot. Notes appear in old-fashioned handwriting, adding information and correcting errors. The attentive adult reader will realize that this “evidence” is a joke — the Latin is garbled; it suggests the words “fish” and “woodland,” neither of which could possibly be connected to the animal described in the book; and the plate number, 926, is preposterous. The illustrator’s name, Whitten Haggard, suggests the author of *She*.



Nichol introduces her story with a Preface about the discovery in the Toronto archives of a letter from an unknown woman which was donated in 1973, apparently by its anonymous recipient. Nichol tells us the following text is a reprint of what remains of that letter, with spelling and punctuation corrections (presumably because the writer was poorly educated). The opening lines of the letter, quoting an old skipping song about the dippers, seem an unlikely way for an unsophisticated writer to begin.

The story is about the summer of 1912 in Toronto, when the dippers start to come up from the Don River into the city. Their descriptions are deeply disquieting. Apparently, they have been lurking near rivers and lake for some time, and are known as far away as Windsor. But now they are becoming bolder; stories are told of their invading houses and following people around. People hang dipper bells to scare them away, but there are



rumours that the bells actually attract them. Then the stories change: we learn that the dippers generally stay away from people who come right up to them. And our sympathy is engaged by the plight of a wounded dipper surrounded by a crowd of children.

Intertwined with these memories is Margaret's personal story. We learn that she and her mother and little sister, Louise, are struggling to survive on the mother's earnings as a house cleaner, and that Louise becomes ill with what was known then as infantile paralysis. Margaret worries about her sister and about her mother losing her job. Her brave mother tells her, "You think every little thing is the end of the world," and Louise cheerfully copes with a paralysed leg. As the summer ends, the dippers gradually disappear, as do Margaret's terrors.

The mysterious story is enhanced by the dreamlike qualities of Moser's illustrations, and the simplicity of Margaret's language and style. The book leaves a haunting impression. Although the language is accessible to young readers, and I'm sure many will be engaged by the story and pictures, this book will appeal at least as strongly to adults, as they come to sense the relationship between solidly factual details about imaginary dippers and the fears that come to us all in the night.

Sandy Odegard is a former secretary, real estate agent, and teacher, who is now concentrating on writing and reading to grandchildren.