

THE CREATION OF FANTASY

The fiction of

Catherine Anthony Clark

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MODERN FANTASY for children is the culmination of a long literary tradition. Time and setting may be as new as today, but themes and creatures are those of the stories told to answer old, unanswerable questions. What is Good? Why is Darkness? Who am I? The imaginative tale appears in an intellectual climate already ripened by a developed mythology. Its protagonist takes on the same giant proportions as does the hero of the myth and legend. He dares to enter the Underworld; he faces and slays dragons; he seeks and, in the finding, he vanquishes the very forces of Evil. These are the dimensions of both the traditional myth and the modern imaginative tale and it is impossible to conceive of the second without the example of the first.

The difficulties of writing fantasy for Canadian children are obvious, for Canada lacks a homogenous mythology. There are two heritages, the Indian and the European, but, while each of these has its riches, neither wholly belongs to the Canada of today. The Indian legends are from an alien and forgotten culture and children find them difficult. Powerful as they are, they speak of unknown ways of the imagination, of the questionings of a primitive people, and they lack immediacy for children whose inheritance is more surely drawn from European lands where folk literature has gained a greater degree of sophistication. The Indian tales have a starkness at variance with the softer, subtler story more familiar to children in this country. Consider the fairy stories. The versions best known to Canadian children (as to most English-speaking children) are drawn from Perrault. Reflecting the age in which they were written, that of Louis XIV, they are, essentially, stories of courtly manners. Although told with Gallic simplicity, they still display the over-elaborate refinement of taste that marked

France's great age. Whatever elements these tales contain from a ruder age (and they do contain some), they still remain opposed to the instinctive, primitive Indian legend.

Owing to the lack of a developed and indigenous folk literature, Canadian writing for children had not been rich in fantasy. Among the few writers who have attempted the imaginative tale for children in this country, Mrs. Catherine Anthony Clark is the only one who has attained a measure of real achievement.

Mrs. Clark has not only attempted the integration of the two cultures; she has also drawn on differing forms of folk lore. She writes fantasy that attempts the heroic dimensions of legend, the high adventure of fairy tale, and the deep, moral implications of mythology. She synthesizes rather than creates. She takes the essence of each form and puts it to appropriate use within her framework of plot and situation. From the myths she has taken their central and dominant theme, the conflict between Good and Evil, and each of her books is concerned with the triumph of Light over Darkness. From the legends she has taken the hero figures, the larger-than-life proportions; from the fairy tales the climate of credulity and belief that lends suspense; and from the folk tales, those earthy and endearing men and women who inadvertently touch off the magic by unthinking word or action. These gleanings from ancient sources are used throughout her four books, *The Golden Pine Cone*, *The Sun Horse*, *The One-Winged Dragon* and *The Silver Man*.

Much of the synthesis that Mrs. Clark achieves between the European and the Indian tales is necessary because she is attempting fantasy in a Canadian background. The mountainous, lake-filled Kootenays which are the settings for her stories are not, obviously, the natural habitat of the rarefied and delicate fairies of Europe. Her fairies must be less of gossamer and more of buckskin. Mrs. Clark uses the wild, unrestrained beings of the Indian myths — Wild Woman, Thunderbird, the ominous figure of the Hunter — as the prime movers in her books. Yet, Mrs. Clark's creatures are seldom wholly from one or other of the two cultures, but, rather, are hybrids of both. Princess Onamara of *The Golden Pine Cone*, for example, is derived both from that familiar of the Indian tales, the magic woman who dwells apart, and from that of the European tales, the heartless princess imprisoned in the friendless world of self. Such minglings give added dimensions by writing the two traditions which form the Canadian heritage and pointing to similarities rather than differences.

The strongest single element, however, is the Indian. Indian life and ways are always a dominant ingredient and the central episodes of Mrs. Clark's books take

place in a long-forgotten land inhabited by a lost tribe. This land does not contain the smoke-filled villages of reality, but, in keeping with the magic themes, it is a land that knows only the ceremonial side of Indian life. Rites and ceremonies, the seeking of the Good, the propitiation of the gods, are the daily observances by which its inhabitants live. Mrs. Clark is quite capable of realism in this area when it suits her purpose, for she is aware as all writers of imaginative tales must be, of the necessary interplay between reality and fantasy. The sea hunt for the killer whale in *The One-Winged Dragon* is a good example of her handling of actual, taut adventure within the boundaries of the fantastic.

In each of her four books the boy and girl leave the Outer World and enter the supernatural land in search of a relative or friend who is bewitched by the powers of Evil. With the aid of the Indians and the magic instilled in them by possession of an Other World charm, the children prevail and fulfil their quest. This simple plot lends itself readily both to the recreation of the myth and to the pursuit, capture and escape of the adventure tale.

LITTLE HAS been said of Mrs. Clark's "borrowing" from the folk tales. It is these tales rather than the others that supply the human element. The human beings in folk lore may be perverse, or roguish, or foolish; they have individuality and flavour. Mrs. Clark's human beings are strong, vocal and decided, and stand in direct contrast to the more ethereal, magical beings. She has followed tradition in making these characters national types, fully and unmistakably of the country from which the tales spring. Her men and women are authentic Canadians and as such they bring a further richness to the "Canadianism" of her books. The Flame-Lighter Woman of *The Sun Horse* is undeniably a witch, but she is also a sharp-edged pioneer. "I am not one to let fruit go to waste. There was no waste in my Ontario home. I had raspberries in the wagon in sealers. Put them up driving through the foothills . . ." Here indeed speaks the woman who dared the prairies in the covered wagon, her vast courage equalled only by her fearful busyness. In *The Golden Pine Cone* we have the legendary trapper and man of the northern lands, Bill Buffer, whose sound "horse sense and no nonsense" brings a relieving, everyday realism into the never-never land. Uncle Barker of *The Silver Man* and Kwong Hu of *The One-Winged Dragon* are authentic Canadiana; the one in the character part of the old pros-

pector turned homely mentor, the other, with his quiet acceptance of suffering, a true and touching portrait of the Orient-born Canadian. Indeed, Kwong Hu is a daring character to create for children, for his depths are outside a child's experience, and a full realization of his character must depend on a child's sympathetic response to quietness and dignity and sorrow. Not only do these characters deepen and authenticate the Canadian settings of the stories; they are also true inventions in themselves.

The transitions from the Real to the Unreal World are difficult to handle in the writing of fantasy. They must be smooth and unforced and able to bear the weight of credulity. Mrs. Clark has introduced an interesting device to make these transitions effective and psychologically sound. At least one of the two children in each book is in some measure at variance and at "outs" with the actual world. He or she hovers already on the edge of the Other World which is also the World of Wishes where unhappiness dissolves in magic. Mark of *The Sun Horse* has but recently lost both parents and must somehow reconcile himself to the narrower, more circumscribed life that is all his aunt can offer. ". . . I was half dreaming . . ." says Giselle, Mark's companion, and indeed she is, for she is one of those children whose gaze is forever inward and whose search — no matter what the immediate object — is always for the inverse of reality. *The One-Winged Dragon* gains considerably in insight because of the interplay between Jenni whose fear of being unloved has made her over quick to quarrel and Michael to whom the same fear has brought too great a caution and too old a patience. Fringa of *The Silver Man* is actually bewitched and lives eerily and inconclusively between the two worlds. Mrs. Clark allows no morbidity (a taboo in books written for children) in this depiction of some slight maladjustment, for it is but lightly touched upon and serves only to heighten the poignancy and strengthen the plausibility of the transition and entry into the Other World. Confronted with problems of their own, these children are at once more real and take a more convincing part in the essential action and main concern of the myth, the never-ending war between Good and Evil. Mrs. Clark's stories gain immeasurably here by the intertwining of the human and superhuman themes. In the larger, more exciting tale, she does not forget her concern for the children, nor *their* concern with the Outer World. In each book the childrens' problems are resolved both in relation to the Outside and in accord with the ultimate values that prevail in the Inner World. This double resolution brings the two levels of her stories, the mythical and the real, into close and believable harmony. The one is but the reverse side of the other, and both together make the whole.

SUCCESS DEPENDS upon so many diverse elements in the spinning of the imaginative tale. Writers must know the appropriate limits of fantasy so that no false note shatters the subtlety, the rightness and brightness of the story. That true balance between the real and the unreal which forms the distinctive characteristic of fantasy must be maintained. There must be a certain suspense and tautness of action; a fey, but not unbelievable mood; a richness, but a disciplined richness, of language, concept and symbol. That Mrs. Clark is not without fault, but that she is evolving a real competence in mastery of her difficult task is clearly demonstrated by a quick review of her four published books.

In *The Golden Pine Cone*, the earliest of her books, there is a certain awkwardness of style and lack of integration. The opening sentence "Not very long ago and not very far away . . ." is rather too self-conscious an attempt to capture the spirit of the traditional opening. The magic element in the story never seems quite real, nor the real quite able to sustain the magic. The half-human, half-fairy creatures such as the dog, Ooshka, are not entirely, nor believably, realized. On the other hand, the wholly fairy creatures such as the Lake Snake with its "belly-scales . . . thin and soft as fungus" are satisfyingly eerie and invocative of an ageless past. In this first attempt, however, Mrs. Clark does demonstrate her feeling for the symbolism of myth and fairy tale, for the needed impetus of the adventure tale. She shows an ability to make her own such traditional themes as that of the giant-killer, the bewitched prisoner, and the lost children. These become the stock-in-trade of her latest stories, and it is no small tribute to her skill that she makes this rather small, closed circle of motifs appear fresh and vigorous in each repetition. Their very timelessness is, of course, a factor in her favour.

The second book, *The Sun Horse*, shows greater depth of perception, more rounded characterization and easier presentation. There is little left of the hesitant and rather disjointed style of the first book; the flow of the narrative is smoother; the magical happenings are motivated more effortlessly. The human beings are more appealing and in the *Flame-Lighter Woman* — as I have already suggested — Mrs. Clark creates a particularly well-delineated character of considerable dimensions. It is in this book, also, that Mrs. Clark introduces her device of placing her children already upon the edge of the Dream World. Nowhere is her innate restraint more apparent than in this delicate and technically difficult situation.

Mrs. Clark's excesses are those of language rather than of sentiment. This

lesser fault is attributable to an ardour not yet trained to the acceptance of disciplined craft. There is a tendency to purple passages, which is particularly marked in descriptions of the supernatural; Mrs. Clark is much more controlled in writing of the natural and the everyday. The Shrine of the Love Magnet, the magic thing the children seek to save their Indian friends from the Thunderbird, is hymned in technicoloured terms of rose quartz, black agate and crystal swans. In the same book, however, she writes: "A phœbe sang; wild ducks flew. From the wooded hill, two ravens came slowly sailing like sheets of burnt paper . . ." The simile used is, perhaps, not very original, but the three sentences together show a restraint and an understanding of the necessary balance in style.

The One-Winged Dragon illustrates another problem that Mrs. Clark faces in her attempt to integrate basically differing mythologies. Here it is the Chinese and the Canadian Indian. The challenge of welding together the flavour of Chinese literature with its delicacy, urbanity and wit, with the more savage, less sophisticated Indian legend is manifestly a formidable task. As might be expected, Mrs. Clark does not manage this integration without some distortion of both. Of all her magical beasts, the Chinese dragon is the least believable and weakest in delineation. He is a somewhat sorry and alien creature, crippled by more than his damaged wing.

In Mrs. Clark's first three books there is a tendency towards over-writing, a lack of true integration, and, perhaps, a certain misdirection, so that the action arising from the magical circumstances appears to take over the story and the author's control sometimes appears lost. In her latest book, *The Silver Man*, Mrs. Clark has brought her art a step nearer total achievement. Here she does not attempt to weld together so many story forms, but gives full rein to an imaginative adventure myth in which the magic lies as much in its pace and tautness as it does in its supernatural elements. She develops the fey Franga, half human, half Other-World, and sets her against the steadfast Kawitha so that there is contrast and subsequently more texture in this story. The central theme and its symbolism — that of the young chief whose blood is slowly congealing to silver so that he will be forever lost to the world of human warmth — is more expertly and authoritatively handled than a similar subject in *The Sun Horse*. Artistically *The Silver Man* is the truest in concept and intent, for here the half-suggested but never fully realized conflict of the other books between the Real and the Dream World for the loyalties of the characters becomes clearer. Indeed, this subtle and adult concept (and no less adult because of the necessary simplification of its

presentation) is the backdrop against which the myth and the magic flash this way and that and play themselves out.

It is still too early and the body of her work is too slight to decide whether Mrs. Clark has succeeded wholly or only in part in creating a mythology for Canadian children in the guise of modern fantasy. That this is her ambitious design is apparent in the decisive manner in which she attempts the integration of the two differing heritages, and in the bold use she makes of the forms and basic ingredients of the fairy tale, folk tale and legend.

