

Where the Novel Went

By LLOYD ALEXANDER

DESPITE fiendish tortures at the hands of our current literary tormentors, the novel has managed to escape from the erogenous dungeons of adult fiction with most of its virtue intact. Though its relevance as a modern art form is questioned, and its demise frequently announced, the novel is alive and well and living in the children's book department.

There, guised in juvenile innocence, the novel continues doing its own thing: to deal as illuminatingly as possible, not as obscurely as possible, with the complexities of the human condition. Many adult writers, showing more ability at imitating each other than enlightening their readers, have turned the novel over, like a three-dollar watch hardly worth repair, to the kids to play with. But the children's novelists are making it work.

I don't imply that all children's novels are good reading for grown-ups, or even for children. Most, like most of anything, are mediocre—and a few, downright wretched. Children's writers suffer from their own occupational hazards, and risk lapsing into what *School Library Journal* recently diagnosed as "stylized boredom," "moral medicine," and "adult nostalgia." Nevertheless, the best children's writers stay pretty much immune to these fatal illnesses; and their work, by any standard, is excellent. Today, with more elbow room in the way of subject matter, and under no obligation to condescend or simper, children's novels can be (as they always could be) valid works of art.

The main problem isn't the books but whether children will read them; whether, in an age of real marvels, they will accept the imaginary marvels offered in books. With the goad of mass media the kids acquire a kind of sophistication based more in quantity of information than quality of experience. The bloom tends to go off the rose fairly early—replaced often by a touch of jadedness formerly found among the desperately poor or the desperately rich. Young people soak up a huge amount of hard data but have little encouragement to digest or interpret it. With more teen-agers jumping directly into adult reading, even the "young adult" novel seems to be go-

LLOYD ALEXANDER's *The High King* recently won the Newbery Medal as the most distinguished contribution to literature for children published in 1968.

ing the way of knickers as a step in the growing-up process.

But I think this sophistication is more surface than substance. The kids are still superbly capable of delight, wonder, excitement; and a good story is still superbly capable of producing this response. If involvement is today's goal in films, theater, and art—what's more involving than reading? For the reader is totally involved in the author's viewpoint and consciousness. Yet it's not a mass experience. A child and his book are always in an intimate, personal, one-to-one relation.

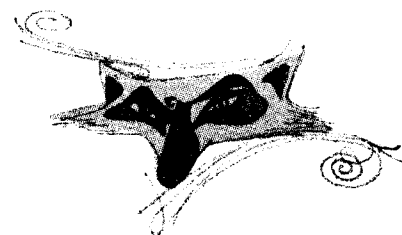
I'm not suggesting that adult writers return to the Victorian three-decker. Every generation has to find its own tonality in art-style as well as life-style. But the sorry state of the adult novel has come about more through lack of talent in its individual practitioners than anything inherently limiting in the form itself, which is versatile enough to flourish in any artistic climate. The novel still seems, even today, the most adequate literary vehicle to express coherently, in breadth and depth, basic human attitudes, emotions, and values.

Adult writers engrossed in producing high camp, low camp, put-ons, and parodies—and some of their own magnificent examples of "stylized boredom"—may have forgotten the effectiveness of a tale well told, as art and entertainment (if the two can really be separated). I'm tempted to urge them to browse through the children's shelves. On second thought, I won't. If they realize what a good thing they've given up, they might want it back.

By ZENA SUTHERLAND

Everybody In! A Counting Book. By Dick Rowan. Bradbury. 30 pp. \$3.50. Sounds like swimming? That's what it is: a series of photographs in which one child plunges into the water (full-page picture faced by a big, clear "1, one") and in succession is joined by nine others, including one small girl who can't quite bring herself to submerge. The series is then shown together as a recap. The faces of the children, who are mixed—black and white, boys and girls—register natural expressions. The digits are given importance by the format, and the photographs provide more interest than the usual cumulation of one dog, two robins, three apples, etc. Ages 3-6.

Harvey's Hideout. By Russell Hoban. Illustrated by Lillian Hoban. Parents' Maga-



—From "The Fox That Wanted Nine Tails."

zine Press. 41 pp. \$3.50. Harvey and his sister Mildred are muskrats, but their performance will be all too familiar to human siblings. The message is clear: it is more fun to be friendly and to share than to spar together and brood alone. The book surmounts the usual deadliness of message-carrying by its delightful dialogue and the humor of the situation. Harvey and Mildred, each pretending that they have big social events on their calendars, play unhappily alone until fate forces their hands—to their great relief. Ages 5-8.

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble. Written and illustrated by William Steig. Windmill/Simon & Schuster. 32 pp. \$4.95. Who could resist Steig's bland nonsense, his wild-eyed but engaging animal characters, or the gentle affection of Sylvester's family? The only child of loving donkey parents, Sylvester the pebble collector is by sheer chance holding a magic pebble when a lion approaches. In panic he wishes he were an inedible rock, and a rock he becomes. The parents mourn, the seasons pass, and time is healing the wounds of their loss. Picnicking on a convenient rock, father idly picks up The Pebble, and suddenly the dishes slide off a happy Sylvester restored to his family! The story is all the funnier because of the sweet blandness of the writing. Ages 5-8.

Princess September. By W. Somerset Maugham. Illustrated by Jacqueline Ayer. Harcourt, Brace & World. 36 pp. \$3.50. Were it not so tongue-in-cheek, this might be a moral tale, or at least a tale with a moral. An excerpt from *The Gentleman in the Parlor* (now out of print), *Princess September* has several elements of traditional fairy tales—the unpleasant older sisters who are jealous of the gentle youngest, the relinquishing of a beloved pet and its subsequent gratitude, and the natural and proper ending: the lovely Princess September, ninth daughter of the King of Siam, marries the King of Cambodia while her sisters are portioned out to his councillors. The illustrations are handsome, and the Maugham wit and style compensate for the humdrum plot. Ages 7-9.

Greyling: A Picture Story from the Islands of Shetland. By Jane Yolen. Illustrated by William Stobbs. World. 30 pp. \$3.95. Out of the legends of the Scottish isles comes a haunting story, bittersweet, of the selchie, the boy who feels a mysterious yearning to return to the sea, but cannot understand why. His foster parents, fearing his loss, know all too well; the child who has filled their lives is really a seal, and when he rescues his father from a storm-tossed boat, it is life for life. The man is given back to his wife, and the son

returns in his old form to his watery home forever. The style has the gentle, crooning quality of the seal songs of the islands, and the rugged simplicity of the story is echoed by the dark, bright paintings that so effectively picture the lonely grandeur of the region. Ages 7-10.

Hit or Myth: More Animal Lore and Disorder. Written and illustrated by James Riddell. Harper & Row. 31 pp. \$2.95. While this isn't a literary masterpiece, *Hit or Myth* is a book with which children can have fun, and it may well stimulate them to an interest in words and word-play. Animal pictures are on the right-hand page, with the name printed in a marginal column; descriptions are on the left. All the pages are cut in half, so that the top and bottom of pictures and comment can be combined to ridiculous effect: the bottom of a rabbit and the top of a dragon (a drabbit) has a legend reading: "St. George had a lot of trouble with one of these animals. It used to roam at large over the land and it lives in holes under the ground and eats lettuce." Ages 8-10.

The Fox That Wanted Nine Golden Tails. By Mary Knight. Illustrated by Brigitte Bryan. Macmillan. 94 pp. \$3.95. Nine golden cheers for a book by a new author whose distinctive style is complemented by the stylized distinction of a new illustrator! Lovely stuff to read alone or aloud, the tale can be adapted for storytelling as an entity or told as three separate stories. The Oriental setting lends flavor to the story of the fox who could, were he to avoid being chased by dogs for one hundred years, become a beautiful woman; after five hundred years, he could be the wisest wizard on earth; after a thousand years, he could have nine golden tails. In each case, the fox discovers that his longed-for goal is a disappointing experience. Subtly sophisticated and entirely charming. Ages 8-10.

Manhattan Is Missing. By E. W. Hildick. Illustrated by Jan Palmer. Doubleday. 239 pp. \$3.95. Don't let the title fool you—Manhattan is a cat. Her absence is a cause of dire concern to the Clarke family, because she belongs to a doting, fussy bachelor whose New York apartment the Clarke family has sub-leased. The energetic sleuthing of the Clarke children is entertaining and the solution is believable, but the book's primary appeal is in the characterization and dialogue of three highly individual English children exploring the folkways of New York. Ages 9-11.

The Golden Days of Greece. By Olivia Coolidge. Illustrated by Enrico Arno. Crowell. 211 pp. \$3.95. Like Alfred Duggan, Olivia Coolidge is so imbued with her subject that authoritative history seeps with an osmotic pervasiveness into the separate incidents and brief biographies, the accounts of plays and contests, the descriptions of great buildings and Grecian crafts. Enhancing this brilliantly simple history of ancient Greece are the large print and dignified illustrations. Ages 9-12.

Night of the Black Frost. By Arthur Cathall. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. 160 pp.

\$3.50. Why shouldn't he quit school? Sixteen years old and son of one of the wealthiest men in Bergen, Leif Knudsen tries to convince his parents that he is mature enough to fend for himself. His father suggests that Leif prove his mettle by working on an Arctic fishing boat with his two uncles, who, the boy soon realizes, will give him no quarter. When the dreaded black frost comes and Leif is left alone on the boat while his uncles go out into the howling, icy gale to rescue two Russian fliers, all his resources are called upon. The atmosphere is vividly created, the few characters are drawn in bold strokes, and the plot is filled with action and suspense. Ages 10-13.

About the B'nai Bagels. Written and illustrated by Elaine Konigsburg. Atheneum. 172 pp. \$4.25. If only mom hadn't gone to a meeting of the B'nai B'rith Sisterhood, she never would have become the manager of the Little League Team they sponsored. Mark, who tells the story, was conscious of his inadequacies, self-conscious about his mother, and driven to play hooky from Sabbath services to get in some secret practicing. The ups and downs of the Little League season are happily scrambled with observations on the crafty manipulations of one of the most endearing Jewish mothers in print, the difficulties of preparing for a Bar Mitzvah, the delightful embarrassment of having a girl friend—sort of—and the problem of an irksome relationship with one anti-Semitic team member. The last is deftly handled, as is Mark's encounter with the centerfold in a girlie magazine. Warm, humorous, and devastatingly real. Ages 10-13.

The Landmark History of the American People: From Plymouth to Appomattox. By Daniel J. Boorstin. Illustrated with prints and photographs. Random House. 192 pp. \$3.95. A distinguished historian presents a panoramic view of American history in the first of two volumes. Like the series by Gerald Johnson (*America Is Born*; *America Moves Forward*; *America Grows Up*. Morrow, Vols. I and II, \$3.95; Vol. III, \$3.75) this deviates from the traditional approach with its emphasis on names, dates, battles, treaties, et cetera, and attempts to reflect the issues and the innovations, the folkways, the mores, and the changing tempo of a vigorous new nation. Although occasionally written down and uneven in style and treatment, the book is often engrossing. Ages 10-13.

To Be a Slave. By Julius Lester. Illustrated by Tom Feelings. Dial. 156 pp. \$3.95. "If you want Negro history, you will have to get it from somebody who wore the shoe, and by and by from one to the other, you will get a book," said a Tennessee slave. Julius Lester has combed through unpublished source material, extracted and organized quotations from those who wore the shoe, and—with interpolated commentary—provided a potent picture of the black man's centuries of slavery. The information is not new, but it has seldom been more effectively presented than in these carefully chosen excerpts from the bitter record of Negro history. Some of them are in dialect, some are polished, and some edited at the source; by and by, from one to the other, Lester got quite a book. Ages 11 up.



—From "The Golden Days of Greece."

Toward Infinity: 9 Science Fiction Tales. Edited by Damon Knight. Simon & Schuster. 319 pp. \$4.95. You must have two things for good science fiction, the editor states in his preface, "... an imaginative idea, based on real science and technology, and a strong, well-told story about believable people." These attributes are present throughout this unusually fine and varied collection. Added to their sturdy base are the poignancy of "In Hiding," the story of the child who must conceal the fact that he is a genius, and the humor of "The Earth Men," in which the first Terrans reach Mars and find that nobody seems interested in them. Ages 11 up.

Mind Drugs. Edited by Margaret O. Hyde. McGraw-Hill. 150 pp. \$4.50. Besides several articles by the editor, a panel of medical experts contributes essays on aspects of drug use and abuse. In sum they present a comprehensive view of addiction and of the intricate social, legal, medical, and psychological considerations thereof. Since the approach is scientific and objective, no moral judgments are made, although several of the writers refer to the existence of such judgments in our society. Addictive qualities, deleterious effects, and patterns of use are discussed at length; separate articles deal with alcohol, heroin, LSD, and marijuana; and a final chapter is entitled "Turning On Without Drugs." Appended are a glossary, an index, suggestions for further reading, a list of places to get help in New York City, and a list of the professional qualifications of contributors. Ages 12 up.

Growing Up Black. Edited by Jay David. Morrow. 256 pp. \$6.50. Nineteen autobiographical accounts of the childhood of Negro Americans compose a deeply moving picture of the harrowing obstacles of growing up black. The excerpts range from the memoirs of one of Jefferson's slaves to the reminiscences of such contemporary figures as Dick Gregory, Malcolm X, and Bill Russell. Varied as are the styles of writing and the backgrounds of the contributors, the pieces have in common a note of poignancy and determined pride. Each selection is prefaced by an editorial note that tells something about the author and his background. For young adults.

