

Pursuing the Piper: A Pied Tale

After Hamelin. Bill Richardson. Annick, 2000. 240 pp. \$19.95, \$9.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-629-2, 1-55037-628-4.

Every story-lover knows that a mysterious piper in parti-coloured clothes saved medieval Hamelin from an unbearable infestation of rats by enticing the vermin to their mass drowning with his magical pipe music. And we all know that when his shameless employers reneged on their promise of payment, he used his irresistible music on the town's children, who followed him dancing (save two: one blind, one lame or dumb) into Koppelberg Hill, through a door that closed behind them forever. But no one knows for sure what happened to the children thereafter.

The most famous literary treatment of the legend, Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" (1842), ends with a suggestion that they emerged from their "subterraneous prison" to find themselves in Transylvania, where they settled. Bill Richardson offers a much more complicated and particularized story in his first novel for children, *After Hamelin*.

Everything about this tale is complex, in fact pied. The heroine and principal narrator, Penelope, newly deaf when her peers departed, and therefore unabducted, has a polymorphous group of associates: heroic Belle, part bird, part troll, and all singer; Quentin, a sensitive dragon, given to skipping, fainting, and histrionics; a cat who can talk during most of the story; a three-legged but fast, fierce dog; and a blind young harpist.

The premises of the fantasy are similarly diverse. And, alas, sometimes cavalierly breached. For instance, the premise that Penelope has the rare gift of "Deep Dream" extended travel and is therefore uniquely obligated to undertake a dangerous rescue mission is carefully established in the mainly explicatory first quarter of the book. But subsequently, as the story's pace quickens, Hamelinites tumble fortuitously into her adventure. Who can do what? The rules seem arbitrary and, at best, bendable. Why can deaf Penelope hear in the dream world and her cat talk while the harpist remains blind and the dog speechless?

Incongruities of atmosphere and tone abound too. Slapstick jostles life-or-death drama. A harpy dragged into the action for a brief turn, to provide a surprise climax, is mimicking a disgruntled human retiree ("... no gold watch, no retirement party, no bonus check, no rousing chorus of 'For she's a jolly good fellow'") seconds before she slashes one character and kills another.

Young readers are unlikely to be captious, though, since the book is so freshly imaginative and provides such a rumbustious ride. They will probably even forgive the author for killing off a likeable character in a story that is elsewhere and often pleasantly silly and, despite the villain's malignity, largely unthreatening.

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