

katherine paterson, *Parzival: The Quest of the Grail Knight*. New York: Lodestar/Dutton Children's Books, 1998. Pocket Size. Pp. xiii. 127. isbn: 0-525-67579-5. \$15.99.

*Parzival: The Quest of the Grail Knight* is a retelling for children of Wolfram von Eschenbach's Middle High German poem *Parzival*. In her afterword, Katherine Paterson notes that she has based her retelling on A.T. Hatto's modern English translation (Penguin Classics, 1980), and that she has simplified Wolfram's story. Indeed, she has simplified it considerably, by leaving out Wolfram's opening chapters on the adventures of Parzival's father Gahmuret (though she does bring in Parzival's Moorish half-brother, Fierefiz, at the end), and cutting out the parallel adventures of Gawan that take up a good half of Wolfram's poem. The result is to strip away narrative embellishments and focus on Parzival himself.

The main details of the Parzival story are here: the untutored boy, his arrival at Arthur's court, his training by his foster-father Gurnemanz, his rescue of and marriage to the princess, his arrival at the 'Angler's' Castle on the Wild Mountain and his failure to ask the question that will heal the wounded king, the public reproach by Cundrie the sorceress, Parzival's despair and rejection of God, his meeting with the hermit and confession, his return to the Castle and asking of the question. But Paterson supplies some modern motivation for the action: Parzival's rejection of God freezes his heart, which can only begin to thaw when he encounters the pilgrims on Good Friday and calls on God again. His subsequent encounter with the hermit Trevrizent (the Angler's brother and his own maternal uncle) teaches him penitence, so that when Cundrie reappears and leads Parzival and his half-brother to the Grail Castle, Parzival is ready to ask the Question, 'Dear Uncle, ... what is wrong with you?' His natural compassion has been freed by his penitence and suffering, so that he can fulfill his mission of healing and be installed as the new Grail King.

All this is told in a simple but vivid prose style, slightly archaic without being self-conscious. Here, for instance, is Parzival's love-trance brought on by the sight of the drops of blood in the snow: 'Parzival stared at the blood as though dazed. Somehow, in those three drops he saw the warm cheeks and bright mouth of Condwiramurs, his wife. With all that had happened since he had ridden away from her, her face had grown dim, but now, staring at the snow, her lovely face was all that he could see. He could not take his eyes away, nor did he want to. He was like a senseless man, imprisoned in a dream' (p. 71).

Though she has based her retelling on Wolfram's poem, Paterson is inadvertently (or perhaps deliberately) influenced by other versions of the Grail story. In Wolfram the Grail is a precious stone, left on earth by the neutral angels, its power to sustain life renewed annually on Good Friday when a dove flies from heaven to lay on it a mass-wafer. Trevrizent gives an elaborate account of its origins and the history of the Grail guardians in Wolfram's Chapter Nine. Paterson omits all this; her Grail is simply 'that sacred vessel that few have ever seen' (p. 51). Thus she evokes the more familiar image of the Grail as a cup, and its association with the Last Supper and Christ's sacrifice. The result of her minor but significant changes is to foreground and

accentuate the Christian message that is only inherent in the original narrative. Instead of Wolfram's rich, complicated poem, with its double plot and its wealth of allusions to astronomy, alchemy, heraldry, and court ceremony, we have a charming and touching fable about the education, suffering, and eventual redemption through faith of a young Welsh boy. Rather than being a retelling, it is an independent version.

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