

Books, etc.

or, Understanding Trivia

Many of you, the more fortunate among you, were lucky enough to have encountered Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* at an early age. But it was only last week that I made my first trip to Toad Hall, and I came away both delighted and confused.

Perhaps I should explain, for those who have never come across this marvelous classic, that it is the story of group of very human animals who live an idyllic life by a quiet little river in the English countryside. The story was written in 1908 and given a new perspective when Walt Disney cartoonized it a decade ago.

A book for children? Ah, yes, it must have been written at least partly for that purpose; but after reading it I'm filled with doubts. Like those other great "children's books", Carroll's *Alice* and Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, Grahame's story is one which has found its way into the hearts of the adult generation. It is a sophisticated work, a sort of universal allegory, a novel of skilful characterization, superb plot, and masterful description.

But there is something that sets *The Wind in the Willows* apart from other children's stories, even those which have been taken over by the adults. The *Alice* books, for example can be read over and over again, and each time something newly delightful can be found in them; but they are, on the whole, rather sloppily connected series of incidents rather than organically whole units. Grahame's book, on the other hand, is a steadily flowing narrative; each incident proceeds smoothly to the next, each character is wholly believable, each sentence is a line of poetry.

I don't think it would be too much of a mistake to view the story as an epic in the best Homeric tradition. Grahame himself calls the recapture of Toad Hall "The Return of Ulysses", likening it to the Greek's seizure of his Ithacan palace as he drove out the suitors. Not that Toad is as impressive a character as Ulysses or Achilles, but his adventures are a close parallel: the long journey, the time spent in prison (like a captive of Circe), and the never-forgotten presence of the river.

The river, like Twain's Mississippi, provides a centre for the story. It is the fluid yet stationary point from which all else radiates—and to which all things return. It is Toad's (and Rat's and even Mole's) Mediterranean; it is the medium through which the characters move.

And it is on the river, or rather on an island in the river, that Rat and Mole have the strange mystical experience which is surely the most puzzling thing in the story. They are summoned by a weird piping, as was Ulysses by the sirens. They seem to pass out of reality as they beach the boat (they are in search of a lost baby otter), and it is here that they encounter the Deity, a scantily-described creature of immense stature suggestive of a goat—and yet we know that the goat is a creature of the Devil, a favourite symbol of the Black Magicians. The animals are filled with love at the sight. What does it all mean? Did Grahame expect children to gain any meaning from this scene?

There's more. What is the strange fit that comes over Rat after his conversation with the sea-farer? Surely it is more than the mere desire to go places that seizes Mole in the first chapter. This desire, and the homing instinct that draws Mole back to his subterranean home after a while, are two of the great forces in the story; but what seizes Rat is something more frightening, more ineffable.

This atmosphere covers the whole book, in fact. We are always conscious of some sort of higher power, some indescribable force that lies under the fears and hopes and joys of the animals. If we are to find a parallel in fantasy literature, it surely must be in the Dark Power of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, and in the destiny that constantly drags Frodo forward.

There are one or two things about the book which do not satisfy. The relationship between animal and man is always ambiguous: we hear of Toad eating roast beef and being thrown in jail just like a man; and yet men have pet canaries and hunt animals with guns. And just how Toad manages to pass for a washerwoman is beyond me, considering the size of most washerwomen.

This is all quite trivial, of course, but remains among the things which puzzle me. The book is as mystifying as it is entertaining. It hints at things which are magical. It is in the tradition of Homer and the Apocalypse.

—Terry Donnelly



—Jim Griffin photo

MAY I HAVE THE PLEASURE OF THE NEXT DANCE?—Guest Conductor Lawrence Leonard rehearses with Australian guitarist John Williams before last weekend's Edmonton Symphony concerts. Actually he's pointing out the handy escape route for use if the orchestra attacks.

Symphony concerts feature sweet Williams and guitar

I have always suspected that there is a good deal of diabolical strategic planning done before each Edmonton Symphony concert by way of parcelling out rehearsal time for each number to be played, but till now I have never been really sure.

As a matter of fact, the revelation of the existence of hanky-panky in the rehearsal setup was so blinding that I'd better relate to you my experience last weekend, when I discovered this fiendish state of affairs.

I went in to the Jubilee Auditorium all warm and glowy in the prospect of hearing one of my favorite pieces, the Elgar *Introduction and Allegro* for strings. I sat excitedly through a splendid and vital performance of three of Malcolm Arnold's *English Dances*, my mouth watering.

"Surely", I thought to myself as Elgar time rolled around, "the orchestra is on today. Surely we will hear a performance of this masterpiece which will make the pulse to race and the blood to sing."

Well, I was wrong. Although it would be going too far to say that the piece was botched, it could be said (and was, by me) that there was a certain something lacking. I later discovered that this certain something was in fact two things, viz., accuracy and co-ordination.

Suffice it to say that I was a broken man. Despite the orchestra's weak support for the guest soloist, Australian guitarist John Williams, I was slightly bucked up by his superb renditions of concertos by Rodrigo and Vivaldi.

But, alas, "weak" is certainly not too strong an adjective to apply to the symphony's accompaniment. At times one was convinced that Williams had wreaked some unknown and terrible disaster on the immediate families of each of the orchestra members, and that they were consequently trying to damage his reputation irreparably.

So it was in a state of profound gloom that I awaited guest conductor Lawrence Leonard's reappearance to conduct the Dvorak

Ninth Symphony, *From the New World*.

It was great, great, GREAT! Such fire, such energy! Suddenly I understood the cleverness of the thing, staking all on effect. Put all your bananas on the last number, and you can't fail.

MORE MUSIC NEWS: the next Edmonton Symphony concerts will be February 25 and 26, when Lawrence Leonard will be back, this time with solo pianist Anton Kuerti, for a program of Shostakovich, Morawetz, Mendelssohn and Smetana.

—Bill Beard

films

I feel like waxing elegiac over love this evening, and rather a good movie lies close to hand for just that purpose—*Arrivaderci, Baby* at the Capital.

If you hate Tony Curtis, you'll love the film, because he plays a grade-A swine who goes around murdering wives for their money.

We see flashbacks of the previous deaths, snappily (i.e., post-Richard Lester) handled, but the main storyline is the one about the two con-artists who marry each other by mistake. (For a serious handling of this, see the Lammles in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. And why no Dickens movies for such a long time, eh?)

This may not look like anything to write home about, but the film has more going for it than its plot.

Its camera-work, for instance: lovely shots of an incredibly art-nouveau domestic stained glass are only the most spectacular of the film's visual felicities.

The acting ranges from competent to virtuoso, with a lot of throwaway lines and a refreshing willingness to let the characters gabble almost unintelligibly when it doesn't matter what they're saying anyway.

And the atmosphere is that which, with infinite variety of nuance, suffuses a good seven-eighths of the movies I've seen this year, the logical (and much more honest) successor to the sexlessness of the "nice" films Hollywood used to churn out—the atmosphere of eros denied.

Herewith follows a really tentative formulation of Thompson's Law of Productive Sterility (cinema version):

For every murder, read a lost kiss; for every burst of creepy sentimentality, read a lover's laugh gone sour. For each film which succeeds, given this formula, in radiating some vitality, read the Unquenchable Vitality of the Human Spirit.

—John Thompson