

Iraqi and Palestinian life in the late forties. It is a brilliant commentary upon a specific time and place.

W.P. Kinsella

*THE MISS HOBBEA PAGEANT*

Toronto: Harper & Collins, 1989. Pp. 200. \$10.95

Reviewed by Don Murray

W.P. Kinsella has published six volumes of short stories about his Ermineskin Indians. The fourteen stories in *The Miss Hobbema Pageant* feature the characters familiar to readers who have laughed with, perhaps sighed for, these engaging folk who first appeared in *Dance Me Outside* (1977). The medicine woman, Mad Etta, is now old, "much as we hate to admit it" (143), says narrator Silas; but she doesn't seem to have grown old, just more solid in her four hundred pounds, more rooted in a tree-stump chair on the reserve at Hobbema, Alberta. Ermineskins do not wander as much nowadays: no longer visit the Queen at her palace, nor look for the Pope among the Dene in the Arctic. Half of the new stories are about Ermineskins who seek work in the white man's world.

In "Graves," a University of Alberta graduate takes a job at the Wetaskiwin Co-op and moves his family off the reserve to Totem Pole Estates, "the ultimate in modern living" (98). But then the distraught man buries himself in his new septic tank in order to dream back to "his culture and his traditions" (100). The local bigot, Pastor Orkin, gathers his choir over Phil's "grave" to sing "Let the Sunshine In" (109). Another church sends two priests in brown garb who are caught as they "skulked in the underbrush, fingering their beads, the setting sun flashing off the crosses at their waists" (108). A radio station sends a reporter to talk with Phil, but she declines to use her interview because it is not newsworthy. "You could pass it off as progress," Frank Fencepost argues, "—white people been burying us for years—now we learn how to do it ourselves" (104). Frank would be comfortable down there if he had "an Indian television" (110), which means a six-pack of Lethbridge Pale Ale. Silas believes that what Phil is doing is no joke. The last words of the story are Frank's: "He ain't never gonna dream if he don't shut up and go to sleep" (111).

Despite some changes, the people in the comic world of *Pageant* are just a step away from the pastoral scene of earlier Ermineskin books. Now a published author, Silas still lives on the reserve and quietly takes a welfare cheque. "I don't think the people of Hobbema," Bedelia Coyote declares, "are ready for a radical leader just yet" (142). The clever Samantha Yellowknees, the truly subversive Indian in their midst, "is an Eastern Indian, a Huron somebody say, come out here from Ontario to be the brains behind Chief Tom" (142)—perhaps she is akin to the real-life Mohawks who forced a violent showdown with the government in Quebec in 1990.

The book's title story parodies a beauty contest (based loosely on an article Kinsella found in a U.S. newsmagazine) in which Frank Fencepost vies for the Miss Hobbema crown in defiance of gender distinctions. However, any radicalism in *Pageant* is cosmetic. Is Kinsella growing gentler?.

The most significant change (given Kinsella's generally safe topicality) in *Pageant* takes place in the opening story, "Being Invisible," which is about Frank Fencepost's sudden desire to overcome his illiteracy. The joker whose gift is an inexhaustible resource of chatter turns to the narrator one day: "I don't know how else to say it, Silas, but when you can't read or write, it kind of like being invisible" (5). The story ends joyously with Frank scampering about, reading window signs and billboards and scrawls on walls, transcribing with his felt pen (an instrument like the artist Silas's): "SAVE THE SALMON, CAN AN INDIAN" (12). The figure of the artist who is articulate in one medium, but apparently incapable of expressing himself in another, is humorously depicted in Frank Fencepost, who must make himself visible by becoming literate.

Giving a symmetry to the whole of the book, the last story in *Pageant*, "The Medicine Man's Daughter," concludes with Silas about to give up writing. It is time, Etta tells Silas, "to start a new life" (198). The end of this story, centering on a rebirth ritual that is Kinsella's marvelous invention, is too good to reveal in a book review.

I suspect that W.P. Kinsella has now left the Ermineskin Reserve for other fictional territories.

Jack Zipes, ed. and trans.

*FAIRY TALES AND FABLES FROM WEIMAR DAYS*

Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990. Pp. 211. \$25.00

Reviewed by Joseph Schmidt

This highly instructive and entertaining volume is comprised of more than two dozen fairy tales by 18 authors (including prominent writers like Kurt Schwitters and Oskar Maria Graf) of the Weimar period. (Anti-) Nationalistic, political, anarchistic, and proletarian-subversive, all kinds of orientations color them. The editor/translator's concise and illuminating introduction provides the background of this attempt to create a modern fairy-tale tradition, and the cultural and political reasons for its ultimate failure. Ironically, some of the stories, particularly by the most productive and creative author, Hermynia Zur Mühlen (20f.), made a comeback during the early seventies when anti-authoritarian educators rediscovered (and republished) them for a new young audience.