



Mirrors and Windows

Kathleen Bailey, editor



Ripples and Ribbits in the Pond

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Frogs have an immense appeal for me, and I can't quite nail down why. As a child I chased darting tadpoles through the shallows of Maple Lake; as an adult I have frog symbols sprinkled liberally throughout my home. Obviously these elusive creatures hold a special fascination. Is their green shade a link to the hidden world of faery? Or is it their wide smiling mouths, with large eyes that take in much? Ultimately, frogs survive astonishing transitions and transformations, beginning as small jelly-like blobs, sliding through the green depths of ponds as tadpoles, then magically, mysteriously metamorphosing into frogs, in shapes totally other to their beginnings.

Donna Jo Napoli plays with the traditional story of the frog prince in *The Prince of the Pond*, turning the tale inside out, and in the process giving readers an amazingly detailed picture of a frog's natural world. The prince is utterly transformed by magic. He becomes an immigrant to a new country, alien within his own skin, unable to be articulate, confident and comfortable. Nothing is familiar -- food, friends or surroundings -- for now he is a small creature, vulnerable in a strange world. He doesn't even have control over his speech -- hence the name "De Fawg Pin".

With a delightful sense of humour, Napoli recounts the tale from the wondering eyes of a knowledgeable female frog who comes to the rescue of the clumsy yet endearing newcomer. As the tale unfolds, it is interesting to see what values are carried into the pond, and transmitted like ripples through the water. Napoli seems to be exploring the core of what it is to be human as she shows Pin's bewilderment and sadness at his transformation. Though he is trapped in an alien body, Pin's reactions are all too human, as he fasts for days to avoid eating insects. Pin plummets into depression, and only finds meaning in life when his rescuer tells him how much she values their relationship.

But equally intriguing are the discoveries made by Jade, his partner, who realizes that she has met a mate who is an intellectual seeker, who, in spite of his difficulties, is exploring and challenging the norms in his new world. Frustrated at not being able to speak clearly, Pin faces the common problem of an immigrant who knows what he wants to say, but can't communicate easily. He stumbles as he speaks, yet doggedly perseveres to explain his ideas. Jade is able to see his intelligence, and bolsters his self-confidence.

As we see a loving relationship develop between Jade and Pin, more and more human actions appear in the story. Pin saves Jade from being eaten by a water snake by a foolhardy leap straight onto the snake's head. His love for his children makes him protective. Finding a safe place to raise a family is totally foreign to Jade, who has never questioned the ways of her world. Normally, tadpoles would be left to fend for themselves after the female frog began the cycle by laying eggs. Feeding fifty tadpoles in a well, where they cannot be eaten by predators, seems extremely bizarre to her, but she is able to adapt.

When he has a son who bonds closely with his parents, Pin creates an elaborate naming ceremony for Jimmy. It seems no coincidence that Schachner's illustration here shows Pin doing a graceful backwards flip. Much of his body resembles the arch of a gymnast, doing joyful handsprings. Frog he is, but his delight in his child is wholly human, and the accompanying picture is of a lithe frog whose acrobatics reflect his human yearnings.

Ultimately, the deeper undertones to the story make for other queries. Pin and Jade's love for their children makes us ask how we, as a human society, treat our young. Napoli has created a parable which leads us to examine what we value about community, intimacy and relationships. When the



spell is broken, and Pin returns to the human world, we are left with a wistful sense that there could be a better way of living, an alternate reality. Isn't that the sign of a true faery tale?

Bibliographic information:

Napoli, Donna Jo. *The Prince of the Pond, Otherwise Known as De Fawg Pin*. Illus. by Judith Byron Schachner. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1992. ISBN 0525449760.

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