

a widespread catastrophe. Wandering aimlessly, they find their way into a secluded and contamination-free valley. There they meet an old man who, sensing how shocked and fatigued they are, urges them to remain in the valley, Kennaquhair. Under the supervision of the old man, Olmun, the children embark upon a process of rehabilitation. To signal its beginning, the children are given new names—Shabin, Meeja, Talig, Alew, Rydeck, and Pummy—which suggest their rebirth as individuals free of the old entanglements of sex, class, and race that presumably contributed to the catastrophe.

The children are set to master step by step the various processes and procedures necessary to maintain a farm, e. g., growing and preparing food, feeding the stock, and making tools. Through this "hands on" experience, moreover, the children gradually emerge from their shock and exhibit more and more the signs of normal, healthy children. Just as importantly they slowly acquire a sense of self-worth as each becomes competent in some trade or skill—cooking, weaving and so on.

When the children appear recovered, Olmun decides to search outside the valley for his own children and grandchildren. Before he sets out, he promulgates just one precept—no fighting. After Olmun's departure, however, the children begin to think only of themselves. Tension crops up and two of the children threaten to separate from the group. Only the actions of Pummy, the youngest, who insists they must not quarrel and works to prevent

fighting, return the group to its senses. Shaken by a near-fatal accident, the children resolve never to fight again and to await Olmun's return.

The novel's strength is its convincing delineation of the children's states of mind—their shock and alienation, their slow acceptance of their own worth, and their groping towards community—and of the breakdown of the fragile community. Especially impressive is the opening chapter's description of the dazed children's wandering aimlessly through the countryside. Hooker's style, an amalgam of short sentences and usually quite simple and concrete diction, is quite suitable for the intended young readers, and is an asset. Paradoxically, the style is also a liability. Since there is little exciting adventure which might draw attention away from the uniform sameness of the writing, the style makes for bland reading. Also contributing to the novel's overall blandness is an excessive amount of process and procedure description, particularly in the first half of the book.

Disquieting too is the sense many readers may have that they are being constantly "nudged" so that they see that cooperation is intelligent and good, while acting for one's own purposes is stupid and wrong. In other words, the didactic always hovers nearby. There are other flaws, small *per se* but, taken as a whole, irksome: the convenient dividing of the children into two equal groups of boys and girls; the illustrations which depict two of the children as black when no mention of race is made in the text; the role of Olmun whose initial presence owes much to coincidence and whose subsequent absence is unduly mysterious.

In subject matter, characterization, and theme *Kennaquhair* seems acceptable for the young. When these elements are blended together, however, the result is a disappointingly bland and tepid narrative and hardly the mix of exciting incident and society-rebuilding one finds in effective survival stories.

—Francis J. Molson

**WRAITHS OF TIME** by Andre Norton  
New York: Atheneum/A Margaret K. McElderry Book. 1976, \$6.95, 210 pp.  
ISBN: 0-589-50057-2 LC: 75-43607

A small ivory box of ancient African design that emits an unknown radiation is found in an airport locker. One of the experts the FBI consults is Tallahassee Mitford, a young archaeologist. She pronounces it a strange mixture of several influences but principally those of the little-known Black kingdom of Meroe in what is today the Sudan. The box is placed in the museum's safe, but when Tallahassee is unexpectedly summoned back in the middle of the night, she finds it giving off a psychic aura which forces her to unite it with another relic in the museum. There

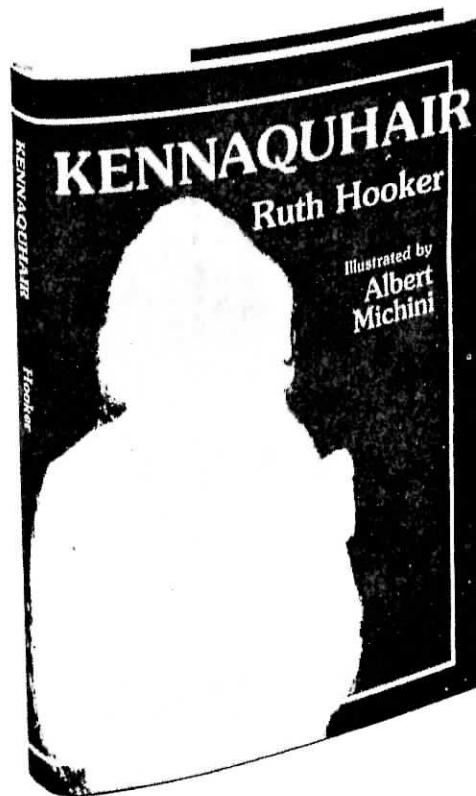
is a dizzying blast, and she recovers in a desert ruin next to the body of a woman who looks just like her.

This is the beginning of an adventure which the reader will probably find as confusing as Tallahassee does. She is quickly surrounded by priestesses in lion-headresses who protect her from brutal guards in ancient Egyptian costumes but with futuristic weapons. Head priestess Jayta gives her a memory implant which teaches her this land's language and history. It is an alternate universe in which the culture of Pharaonic Egypt and Amazonian Meroe were not engulfed by invaders but have endured in a powerful African kingdom. Now after 4,000 years the Empire of Amun is threatened from within by a sinister advisor to the ruling Queen's power-seeking brother. It was this evil Khasti who sent the all-powerful Key and Rod through dimensions to our world, and it was Princess Heir Ashake, Tallahassee's psychic twin, who brought them back (and Tallahassee in their wake) at the cost of her own life. Now Tallahassee must take Ashake's place for her own safety and that of civilization itself.

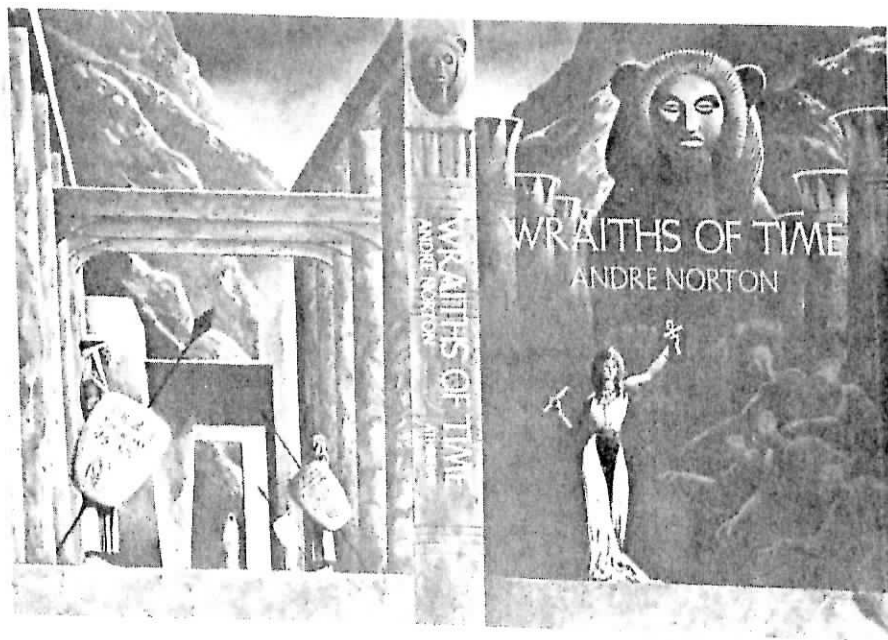
Before Tallahassee can really grasp all this, she is thrust into a Prisoner-of-Zenda role in which she must impersonate the dead Ashake while the good guys rally their forces and seek the weak spot of the omnipotent Khasti, who is apparently from a third dimension yet. Or maybe outer space, or possibly the future; never mind, we haven't time for these petty details! Tallahassee is rapidly abducted and caged in Khasti's laboratory and/or torture chamber; led to escape by the puzzling wraith (?) through a secret passage; and manipulated through several further breathtaking episodes along the outskirts of Khasti's offstage march toward ultimate power; until they confront each other at the climax and Khasti is defeated by something that Tallahassee does under instructions she again doesn't exactly understand. Following which all the good guys convince her that they love and respect her as much as the original Ashake, so it doesn't matter that they can't send her home to Earth again.

I concede that if I were faced with the same mind-numbing situations that Tallahassee is, I might not do any better. Still, I found it difficult to identify with or care about a protagonist who spends the entire book being bewildered and fast-talked into actions that she must take entirely on faith are the right things to do.

I was even more exasperated by the lack of detail about this alternate dimension. We are told that it separated from ours about 1,500 years ago, and that Amun has maintained a powerful culture in northern Africa that blends elements from Ethiopian in the East to Ashanti in the West, while integrating the natural technological advancements of mankind. This could be fascinating. Yet all we are



Cover art by Albert Michini



Cover art by Jack Gaughan

shown is a millenia-old ruin in a desert; the private quarters of a couple of palaces and temples; a military encampment back in the desert; and miles and miles of dank underground passages. The only way that Tallahassee gets from one scene to the next, when she isn't stumbling about underground, is when she is being carried either unconscious or hooded! Thus the reader sees no more of Amun than meaningless glimpses; a mixture of stylized ancient Egyptian and Nubian motifs in interior decoration and clothing along with such modern implements as flashlights, handguns, and so forth. This is incredibly lazy world-building.

The only thing I can say for *Wraiths of Time* is that most of the strong characters are female and Black, so it may please two contemporary interest groups—but only superficially. Its gaudy trappings (including an excellent dust jacket by Jack Gaughan) cannot disguise the fact that it is a weak, boring novel; a particular disappointment considering Norton's excellent past record. Not recommended.

—Frederick Patten

**THE MAGICAL CUPBOARD** by Jane Louise Curry. Illustrated by Charles Robinson. New York: Atheneum/A Margaret K. McElderry Book. 1976, \$6.95, 138 pp. ISBN: 0-689-50059-9 LC: 75-43892

*The Magical Cupboard* is a sequel to Curry's earlier *Parsley Sage, Rosemary & Time* (DF&SF, August 1975). The background needed to understand this sequel is inserted neatly (if not imaginatively) in a set of letters between Rosemary and her aunt, with P. S.'s from her uncle and the cat, Parsley Sage.

The story tells on two levels what became of a magical cupboard, which brings

people what it thinks they need most and which had disappeared in the earlier book. The first level is the twentieth century, where (or when) Uncle Bill speculates that the Grouts stole the cupboard. He suggests checking antique shops along what in the Grouts' time would have been likely escape routes. Level two is the Grouts' time, 1722. They did indeed try to get away with the cupboard. They drag along with them a set of accomplices/victims who are against them or turn against them, and so prove their undoing: Mother Hollybush and her son Davvy who try to doublecross them all the way; and her good son Golly and orphan Felicity Parmenter who hope to see right done.

The book is pleasant enough reading for one time through, but it's... well... tiresome. As the names of the girl and the cat show, Curry is given to labored humor. *The Magical Cupboard* doesn't contain any creaky puns such as the earlier book's title, but the names are equally "cute": the reverend Mr. Thanatopsis and Sufferana Grout, alias Grommet, Gritt, Grottle, and (for a change) Mr. and Mrs. Thaniel Plumtree, "for it sounded round and sweet where they were lean and sour." Then why, for goodness' sake, didn't they choose more sensible-sounding aliases in the first place? They could have been Gardners, Gays, or Gurneys, instead of deliberately choosing names that say, "I am the comic villain of the story." A Dickensian Grimethorp or Ebenezer Scrooge may signal his nature in his name, but the author doesn't ask us to believe that the character took such a name of his own free will.

The Grouts and their accomplices, Mother Hollybush and her two boys, Davvy and Golly, would be acceptable with such names if their behavior could match up to them—the Dickensian humor of exaggeration, eccentricity, and serene self-

confidence. But it doesn't. Their humor consists chiefly of snapping at each other and at the good people, with the snuffling of Puritan pieties in between. But neither the snaps nor the pieties are very hearty. "I am," snapped Plumtree. "Come round this side, you great oaf!" "Fool!" snapped Plumtree. "The brat's worth more to me than any bundle of bed-clothes," or even, "Mother Hollybush's cheery smile scarcely wavered as she reached out to box Felicity's ears, and then reached down the laundry paddle to give her a proper swat." Compare the authentic Beadle Bumble of *Oliver Twist*: "'Juries,' said Mr. Bumble, grasping his cane tightly, as was his wont when working into a passion, 'juries is ineddicated, vulgar, grovelling wretches.'" "

The illustrations by Charles Robinson seem to me to match the story—unfortunately—in being exaggerated without actually being funny. They mix a drab charcoal realism with unnaturally long, ugly faces. The jacket illustration is attractive; color sets off the figures, and the use of realistic detail is appropriate in showing off the cupboard of the title, but the interior illustrations struck me as dull.

The story of how the Grouts get their come-uppance in attempting to steal the magical cupboard provides the main interest in the story. Their finagling was what made the novel reasonably pleasant to read. But this interest is diluted by two other, less interesting subplots. The story of the love that grows between the good little orphan, Felicity, and the improbably good Hollybush boy, Golly, is pretty much part of the Grout story and so does not distract greatly from it, except that Fissy and Golly are not really interesting characters. However, the present-day search for the cupboard in our time, a plot left over from the original book, is purely a distraction. (Moreover, it is not



Cover art by Charles Robinson