I guess some of you aren’t suchvides the other children with a parents “witch doctors;” a child why Amos is not afraid of ghosts: that my dad calls blacks: spooks. see anything else."

of view for his story risks the alt- happen. Children, whether ra­
of prejudice, teasing and threats; and courageous by turns, is an em­
his understanding, and ours, is these cultural sophistication, dis­
the ignorance of some (by no look ludicrously funny, or just
and entertaining by means of
that of the clever tortoise who
fantasy adventure.

and somewhat confusingly; there is numerous characters who are hard
world through the door of a re­
a compelling read. Kushner is a
draws together themes of black
the adventures of slaves escaping
arian civil wars of this century, to
Far from escapism, this fantasy
the real world in such a way as to
set is morally empowered to show
omes the setting for an odyssey
inhabitants of Port Jordan intro­
types of good and evil, leading us

is Kushner’s awareness that fear­
ism exists everywhere, including
rage in the schoolyard is given its
great bravery in the fantasy world.
chological explanations either: in
adults in various stages of the fan­
kedness that underlies racial dis-
writing for patronizing young read-

ers; more than most, his books demand thoughtful and informed reading. But
the rewards are rich for those willing to pursue them.

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A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW

For the birds. Margaret Atwood. Douglas and McIntyre, 1990. 54 pp. $12.95


In the year 1786, writing as one of the group of
writer-educators now referred to as the Sunday
Schools Moralists, Mrs Sarah Trimmer pro­
duced her best known work for children under
the title of Fabulous histories, designed for the
instruction of children, respecting their treat­
ment of animals. In this quintessentially evan­
gelical book, which came to be widely known as
The history of the Robins, Mrs Trimmer prose­
lytizes for religion, obedience and the Christian
family through comparisons between a human
family and a family of Robins. The two human
children who appear as primary beneficiaries
in this edifying fable are indoctrinated in the
late eighteenth century concern for matters spiritual. While Mrs. Trimer’s
purposes are clear enough, so too, alas, is the palpable urgency of that pur­
pose. How many young readers would, because of its blatancy, resist, Trim­
mer’s pleading, is, of course, a question of some importance.

For late eighteenth century, read late twentieth; for spiritual indoctrina­
tion, read environmental concerns, and, for Mrs. Trimmer, read Ma Atwood.
Margaret Atwood’s For the birds, interestingly enough, reverts to a metaphor
similar to that used by Mrs. Trimmer some two hundred years earlier as she
reveals her particular theme primarily through the perspective of birds. But
while Margaret Atwood’s dedication to her theme is no less urgent than is
Sarah Trimmer’s to hers, Atwood’s formidable arsenal of writing skills ren­
ders her proselytizing engaging, convincing, and ultimately, enjoyable.

Samantha, the book’s heroine, friendless and plagued by the cheerlessness
of a new home in a big city, carelessly throws a stone at a beautiful red cardi-
nal, knocks it unconscious, and is set upon by a strange neighbour, one Phoebe Merganser. As Phoebe chastises Samantha, and transfixes her with an ancient mariner stare, Samantha finds herself transformed into a Scarlet Tanager even as Phoebe is being changed into a large, black crow. With the metamorphoses in place, Samantha and Phoebe set off on a migration from Canada to a tropical rainforest in South America. Samantha’s disbelief equals that of any skeptical young reader’s at this startling development, but as she gradually learns to speak bird and eat worms (these and similar incidents are wonderfully tempered with logic and humour by Atwood), her incredulity fades. So too does the reader’s, and by the second of the eight chapters of the book, it is not suspension of disbelief which gnaws at the reader, but the unconscionable carelessness, cruelty, and myopic destructiveness of human beings with respect to their environment. Samantha suffers through experiences integrally linked to the critical environmental issues highlighted by Atwood.

The environmental crises covered in the book, including air and water pollution, chemical spraying, the annihilation of wildlife, and the destruction of the Amazonian rainforests, are made relevant to the young reader because they are made very relevant to Samantha. As she is stalked by her very own pussycat, suffers the pains of poisoned air, barely escapes sadistic hunters and finally passes out in a denuded jungle forest, Samantha’s reactions are not only those of a Scarlet Tanager, but those of a very ordinary young girl who has been quite literally taken up in a cause hitherto unknown to her. Atwood brings home those concerns to children in a way which empowers them to address the environmental degradation they will certainly experience.

Two other points warrant notice in For the birds. John Bianchi, in some thirty deft colour illustrations, captures two of the dominant aspects of Atwood’s text: the peculiar poignancy and humour of Samantha’s forced migration, and the underlying seriousness of the environmental hazards she encounters. Secondly, the book includes a sidebar text, with data on environmental issues and practical activities for children such as how to make a backyard more appealing to birds. The sidebar is aesthetically obtrusive: without it the book indeed would be a purer artistic creation. The compromise in favour of the informational material perhaps is best viewed in terms of what
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Earthcare Bocks, a series dedicated to pollution and environmental issues, is
trying to bring to the children of Canada.

James Gellert is a member of the English Department at Lakehead Univer
and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. He has published critical
articles on fairy tales, North American folklore and Western Canadian fiction.

L’UNION FAIT LA FORCE

Illus. auteur. Montréal, La courte échelle, 1990. Non paginé, broché. ISBN 2-
89021-141-X.

Inutile de décrire longuement la série "Plaisirs de...", déjà bien connue, dont
tous les volumes destinés à un très jeune public offrent, pour chaque double
page, une comptine à gauche et une illustration pleine page à droite.
La comptine est un genre difficile qui demande de l’humour, de la vivacité,
de l’insolite, du rythme, des jeux phonétiques, pour ne citer que les principales
caractéristiques du genre. Dans les deux derniers volumes de "Plaisirs", toutes
ces qualités, à l’exception des jeux phonétiques, évidemment, se retrouvent
les images, mais trop peu dans les textes. Les efforts pour insuffler au
texte rythme et vivacité sont parfois anéantis par un certain prosaïsme du
texte, qui explique, à juste titre pourtant, l’image de la page de droite. Car sans
les comptines explicatives, comment faire comprendre au jeune lecteur que
Souris-Lili dans la gueule de l’hippopotame ne court aucun danger, que la
bataille de boules de neige n’est qu’un jeu sans intention belliqueuse et que le
rhinocéros n’a pas pour dessein d’écraser les tortues? Les comptines apparaïs-