

Picture Books for Young Children

CAROLINE WHITE

Alphabet Book, Anne and Alex Wyse. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969. 50 pp.

Fresh Fish . . . and Chips, Jan Andrews. Illustrated by Linda Donnelly. Toronto: The Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974. 16 pp. \$2.00 paper, \$4.25 cloth.

How the Pelican Got Its Baggy Beak, Joey Hildes. Winnipeg, Peguis Publishers, Ltd., 1974. 30 pp. \$4.00 cloth, \$1.95 paper.

I'm a Child of the City, Esther Fine. Illustrated by Ann Powell. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1973. 32 pp. Paper.

Irene's Idea, Bernice Geoffroy. Illustrated by Frances McGlynn. Kitchener, Ontario: Before We Are Six, 1974. 22 pp. \$1.25 paper.

Mandy and the Flying Map, Beverly Allinson. Illustrated by Ann Powell. Toronto: The Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1973. 16 pp. \$2.00 paper, \$3.25 cloth.

Once Upon an Elephant There Was a Time. James Barber. Illustrated by Claudine Pommier. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974. 16 pp. \$4.95 cloth.

Patrick the Diesel, Kendell James MacDonald. Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, Ltd., 1974. 20 pp. \$3.50 cloth, \$1.25 paper.

Stone Soup, Carol Pasternak and Allen Sutterfield. Illustrated by Hedy Campbell. Toronto: The Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974. 16 pp. \$3.00 paper, \$6.25 cloth.

The Grunk, Doug Jamieson. Illustrated by Robin Wight. Kitchener: Before We Are Six, 1973. \$1.25 paper.

The One to Fifty Book, Anne and Alex Wyse. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1973. 100 pp. \$2.75 paper.

The Travels of Ms. Beaver, Rosemary Allison. Illustrated by Ann Powell. Toronto: The Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1973. 32 pp. \$1.25 paper.

I t is possible for authors and those of us who influence children's reading to be so anxious to give a young child our view of the world that we do not leave room for the child to explore for himself. The best picturebooks will be those that offer the child a full and imaginative experience but leave him or her free to appreciate the experience in his or her own way. In other words, picturebooks should respect children. The new generation of liberated women has brought a breath of fresh air to the Canadian picturebook market in the last two years. Their concern is that children of both sexes should be freed as early as possible from the subtle conditioning of the past. The best of the new books do not preach. They offer small yet perfect experiences, stories of children in active, self-assertive roles. In other words, books written from this standpoint will respect both the character and the reader. The children depicted may just happen to be girls. Although the emphasis was too heavily on boys, of course the best of the older books did respect children. However, there is room in the picturebook market, and particularly in the cheap book market, for a fresh injection of this healthy attitude. During the last two years, enterprising local groups across Canada have been producing original picturebooks in cheap format, often with the aid of government grants.

The Canadian Women's Educational Press in Toronto made an excellent start in their picturebook publishing in 1973 with *Mandy and the Flying Map* by Beverley Allinson. The story shows adults typically in postures of authority and alarm, invariably unable to respect the adventurousness and self-sufficiency of a child, especially "a helpless little girl." Mandy's responses are deliciously polite and unanswerable: "It's all right, . . . It's my flying map and I can help myself," as she puts herself out of their reach. This is followed by the full abandonment of Mandy to her own desire to explore, to experience, illustrated by a joyous picture: "'I've always wanted to touch a cloud,' said Mandy with her arms outstretched. 'It's not a bit like marshmallow.'" The illustrations by Ann Powell are fresh, clear and simple, blue outline on white with single washes of colour and an assured use of space in the design of every page.

Earlier books from the Women's Press and its predecessors showed a less certain touch. *The Travels of Ms. Beaver* by Rosemary Allison

allows a female beaver a freedom to travel similar to Mandy's but more down-to-earth. This allegory of new revolutionary womanhood is marred by several sentence fragments. The comfortable tone of everyday speech would not have been lost by accurate punctuation. The sparkling originality of the tale, amusing details and the rich Canadian flavour of it make it a book not to be rejected, however. *I'm a Child of the City* is also set in Toronto. It is a child's-hand-sized book by Esther Fine. The suggestion at three points in the text that "Some people think it's a pity" to live in the city puts an unnecessarily defensive adult tone into the text. The carefree celebration of city life, noises and people, speaks very well for itself. Charming line drawings by Ann Powell capture the firm but light tone of these books.

As successful as *Mandy and the Flying Map* is *Fresh Fish . . . and Chips* by Jan Andrews. While mother catches fish for supper, father peels potatoes. This coolly accepted role reversal becomes another effervescent fantasy as the busy mother catches ten different sea creatures ending with a whale. Linda Donnelly's bold line drawings, black on white, give us the energy of the story so that they are, as they should be, inseparable from it. The folktale *Stone Soup* is retold by Carol Pasternak and Allen Sutterfield in a Toronto school setting. The illustrations by Hedy Campbell are in sepia line, shading and collage. The text is much longer and certainly not intended for the younger preschoolers. It is a touching tale of awakening interest in and respect for the special backgrounds of immigrant children. As the quality of Women's Press books improves, they are most unfortunately pricing themselves out of the cheapest category.

At a time when paperback picturebooks were rare in Canada, a group of students in Waterloo began the praiseworthy task of showing single parent families in children's books. Their three earlier books have inappropriate overtones of adult consciousness and pre-judgments. Their latest book, *Irene's Idea*, concentrates on a single occasion, which gives it the here-and-now immediacy of a young child's world. Irene, faced with Fathers' Day at school but no father, is allowed in this book to handle her own problem and find her own simple, happy solution. She makes a Fathers' Day Card which celebrates her own family, fatherless but complete. Another book, *The Grunk*, is about a monster who always plays to win and throws rather alarming tantrums when it loses. A moral is not drawn and a happy ending is not imposed.

While the search is on for books that actively respect a child's own world, the appearance of books by children is welcome. Anne and Alex Wyse's *The One to Fifty Book* draws together a multitude of children's illustrations for a counting exercise. Even the type used was designed, made and printed by children. The result is a fascinating black and white variety of penguins, tools, cupcakes, houses and other points of childish interest. It is a suitable successor to their earlier *Alphabet Book*. Both are issued by University of Toronto Press. Unhappily the plump counting book is not bound as strongly as are the other paperbacks mentioned here.

Two small books written and illustrated by nine and ten-year-old children were published in Winnipeg in 1974. They are hardcovered and

appear to be very sturdy. In *Patrick the Diesel* by Kendall MacDonald an anthropomorphised engine derails a caboose and holds up other trains by his overfondness for going fast. On his return to Winnipeg, where "the boss screamed at him, 'You're STUPID!'" Patrick dissolves in remorse. The picture of his out-of-shape sadness is very successful. In the last three pages he promises not to "play whiplash on the corners again," and wins the following year's safety medal. The harsh picture of interaction with authority will chasten adults, but the combination of machines and emotion will delight children. *How the Pelican Got Its Baggy Beak* by Joey Heldes has equally delightful drawings. There is an ingenious imitation of folktales when the fishing pelican "crashed into a rotten buoy," where his beak sticks and swells "from the salt water" and "From that time, all generations of pelicans have had baggy beaks." The confident logic will go as unquestioned as any folktale. Unfortunately, each of these books provides a biography of the author, which goes quite against the tradition of picturebooks and introduces a jarring, self-conscious note quite absent from the tales themselves.

In 1974 McClelland and Stewart published *Once Upon an Elephant There Was a Time* by James Barber. This is a play on words which is neither logical, nor amusing, nor rhythmic. "Can kangaroos cook? No. But cuckoos can. Cuckoos can cook? No. Cuckoos can can. Can what? Cuckoos can can beans." The animals illustrated appear as stunned as the reader. There are books which invite children to play with words. This one appears to want to trip them up and leave them feeling foolish.

As examples of how we treat our children, the new picture books available to Canadian children vary from the enriching and fulfilling to the demeaning and belittling. Since the great majority meet the demand that the children should be respected, we can be hopeful that our children will be encouraged to respect themselves.

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