

# Pitfalls in Picture-Book Production

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*an even roll*, semaja. Semaja, Bear River, N. S., 1975. Unpagged. Paper.

*Kaki-wahoo*, A. P. Campbell. Illust. P. Airdrie. Yearling Press, 1974. 29 pp. \$2.95 paper.

*I Climb Mountains*, Barbara Taylor. Illust. Barbara Yacone. Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1975. Unpagged. \$6.75 cloth, \$3.00 paper.

*Piney, the Talking Christmas Tree*, Mary Eustace. Illust. Manolo Corvera. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975. Unpagged. \$5.95 cloth.

*A Tale of An Egg*, Ken Tolmie. Oberon Press, 1975. Unpagged. \$4.95 cloth.

As early as 1658 Comenius, a Moravian bishop, wrote "Pictures are the most intelligible books that children can look upon." Certainly no one today questions the value of picture books for the young child. As the first books he encounters in his reading life they are the most important, for, depending upon the amount of enjoyment he finds in them, he may or may not become a lover of books. These books are also among the most beautiful he will ever see, providing him with a vital and stimulating visual experience while awakening in him a sense of aesthetic appreciation. Although he may later remember the stories and pictures only dimly, these books will stir his imagination as few others will ever have the power to do.

The picture book first appeared in England in the late 19th century and in the United States in the 1920's and 1930's. It was not until 1940, however, that picture books began to be published in Canada and then only sporadically. Even today there are few Canadian picture books available. Why?

According to Canadian publishers, the main factor prohibiting the manufacture of picture books is that of high printing and production costs. Unlike their American and British competitors, Canadian publishers have no extensive income-producing backlists of reprint materials to support the costs of new titles, while, at the same time, the size of their market is limited by Canada's relatively small population.

A more important factor, however, may be that, although the picture book is as credible an art form as any other, only a very small number of Canadians with exceptional artistic and graphic skills have shown any interest in the genre. Such artists as Ann Blades, William Kurelek, Elizabeth Cleaver and Frank Newfeld have all produced beautiful books for children, but apart from these there are few

practitioners of the picture book art to be found in Canada.

During the past decade, as a result of a growing sense of nationalism, the demand for Canadian picture books has increased dramatically. The market is there, but to succeed in this market a book must be more than simply Canadian, for children are not influenced by chauvinism in choosing which stories to love. To succeed a book must be a "good" picture book, not just a Canadian one.

As with any art form, evaluating a picture book is difficult, since each of us brings something different to what he sees. In general, however, the success of a picture book rests on an integration of the words and pictures in such a way that a complete unity is achieved. In a good picture book the illustrations do not simply accompany the text, but rather one complements the other. Neither can stand alone. The plot, besides being lively and interesting, must be carefully and compactly constructed, while the pictures should be filled with enough action and movement to tell the child the story he himself cannot yet read. Along with believable characterization, there should also be one central figure, human or animal, with whom the child can identify. The language of the text should be clear and finely honed, possessing at the same time a rhythmic, lyrical cadence allowing the story to appeal to the ear as well as to the eye. The illustrator may use any artistic style he wishes, but generally those which are most successful are simple, honest and free from unnecessary embellishments. One of the greatest dangers in the picture book field today is that of over-illustration, with the emphasis being placed on form rather than on content. Such books cater to the tastes of adult buyers, their aim being not to gently stimulate a child's imagination but rather to dazzle him and to exhibit the artist's own cleverness.

Such criteria are guidelines, not rules, but until Canadian picture books are able to meet such standards they will never surpass their American and British competitors. Some books, such as Ann Blades' *Mary of Mile 18* or William Toye's and Elizabeth Cleaver's *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham*, have fulfilled these criteria; the five following titles unfortunately have not.

*an even roll* by semaja is not a children's picture book at all but rather an arty, adult diversion. Beginning in mid-sentence, "ago in the land of roll", it continues on as a vague, slightly disjointed fantasy concerning semaja, a pardulian, who sets off to the roller dome to learn the secret of happiness from the rollers. The author uses no capitals and his writing style, filled as it is with such sentences as "what exclaims him is. . ." or "semaja is certainly glad he doesn't have to fake arfur murphy dance steps", is one which would confuse even the brightest child. The illustrations complement the style of the text, being pen-and-ink drawings of formless, blob-like shapes set against equally undefined backgrounds. The author/artist has had his work displayed at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery and in such a setting it may be appropriate; it does not, however, belong in a picture book for children. With illustrations devoid of life or feeling and with a confused text, the book contains nothing to stir a child's imagination; it can only bewilder.

Indian legends and stories form one of the best sources of truly Canadian material available and from these tales have come some of our best picture books. Unfortunately, A.P. Campbell's *Kaki-wahoo; the Little Indian Who Walked on his Head* cannot be included among these recommended titles.

Kaki-wahoo is an Indian boy who refuses to walk upright, preferring instead to hop on his head. The other members of his tribe all ostracize him until one day his strange habit saves them from destruction. In honour of this event, the tribe makes him its chief, but Kaki-wahoo soon grows power-mad and commands that everyone hop on his head. The tribe rebels and Kaki-wahoo is exiled.

While the central idea of a boy who hops on his head is highly original and likely to appeal to young readers, the story is too long and too weakly constructed to hold their attention. Nor does Kaki-wahoo ever become a sympathetic enough figure to truly win the reader's interest. Airdrie's pen-and-ink drawings, vaguely reminiscent of Maurice Sendak's early work, although humorous and cleanly drawn, are not strong enough to support the muddled story line. They illustrate it but do not go beyond it to add a deeper dimension. In fact, *Kaki-wahoo* is not a true picture book at all but only an illustrated story.

A new type of picture book now appearing frequently in Canada is the "non-sexist" book, the aim of which is to overcome role stereotyping in young children. In Barbara Taylor's *I Climb Mountains, Annie*, tired of hearing what Peter can do and urged on by her friend Lucy, starts to dream up fantastic things that she can do, from climbing mountains to kissing the man-in-the-moon, until finally she earns sceptical Peter's respect. Annie is a heroine with whom any child can identify, the humour and determination of her nature being perfectly captured in Barbara Yacono's illustrations which fit the spirit, as well as the facts, of the book. The text fulfils the criterion of combining simple language with a rhythmic cadence, and, while there is little action in the story, its humorous high spirits mixed with a touch of fantasy carry it easily along. Designed to appeal to very young children, this book meets a definite need. Unfortunately, while good of its kind, *I Climb Mountains*, like many books written with a purpose, possesses neither great literary merit nor strong artistic appeal.

At the opposite pole from books designed to expound an idea are those such as Mary Eustace's *Piney, the Talking Christmas Tree*, aimed only at commercial success. Piney writes a song to give to Santa but the villainous Red Rail Fox steals it and plans to claim it as his own. Happily, the good fairy of the forest appears in time to help Piney and reform the fox. Highly derivative both in plot and illustrations, this book is a slick, mass market product, its saccharine Disney-like pictures representing all that is bad in the world of children's book publishing. Such a work is merchandise, not literature. Nevertheless, *Piney, the Talking Christmas Tree* will no doubt be a great commercial success, being popular with those children brought up on a diet of comic strips and cartoons. What is particularly distressing about this book is that its physical format is excellent, the colours are clear, and the paper and binding of good quality. What a pity that McGraw-Hill could not have

found a more original title in which to invest its money.

Of the five picture books reviewed here Ken Tolmie's *A Tale of An Egg* is perhaps the best. An egg, warned by an owl of his likely fate, sets off through the forest asking all the creatures he meets what else he can be. At last a wiley fox offers the suggestion that he become Humpty-Dumpty. Although the plot is not highly original, it is at least fast-moving and filled with the sort of silly, punning humour - "No", said the bee in a stinging voice! - that children love. Ken Tolmie is an artist by profession and it is in the illustrations that the book excels. Tolmie's large pen-and-ink drawings are simple, honest and direct, executed with scrupulous attention to detail but without extraneous clutter. Such meticulous pictures, highlighted as they are by gentle touches of humour, as in the "fir" tree in its "fur" coat, have a natural appeal for children. With the illustrations further enhanced by an attractive layout, good quality paper and solid binding, this work would be a very good picture book if only the text were a little more inspired. Unfortunately, the phrasing of the text is at times awkward and lacks rhythm and lyricism needed to make this work not merely a good book but an excellent one.

While television and film producers and the publishers of comics and magazines are all attempting to influence the visual perception of the child, it is the duty of those of us truly concerned about children's books to work, through careful selection and evaluation, to encourage the production of good picture books. Canadian children need books reflecting their own viewpoints and there is, without doubt, a growing demand for such material from parents, teachers and librarians. However, if Canadian picture books cannot achieve the high standards established by British and American titles we should not accept a lower quality of book simply because it is Canadian. Elizabeth Cleaver, Ann Blades and William Kurelek have all proven that excellent picture books can be produced in Canada; let us only hope that more such creative works will soon appear.

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