

Canadian Alternatives to Dick and Jane

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Irene's Idea, Bernice Geoffrey. Illustrated by Frances McGlynn. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, n.d. 21 pp. \$1.50 paper.

Minoo's Family, Sue Heffernan Crawford. Illustrated by Frances McGlynn. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, rev. ed. 1974. 45 pp. \$1.50 paper.

Please Michael, That's my Daddy's Chair, Susan Elizabeth Mark. Illustrated by Winnie Mertens. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, n.d. 35 pp. \$1.50 paper.

Families Grow in Different Ways, Barbara Parrish-Benson. Illustrated by Karen Fletcher. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, n.d. 27 pp. \$1.50 paper.

The Last Visit, Doug Jamieson. Illustrated by Francie Kirk. Waterloo, Ontario: Before We Are Six, 1975. 24 pp. \$1.50 paper.

A few years back, I gave the library of the school my daughter attended a modest amount of money to buy some of the new non-sexist children's books. When the books were put on display, one parent was heard to remark that the school did not need books like these since "all our children come from happy families." Two of the teachers were curious enough to check what they took to be one of the implications of the parent's remark—that all the children in the school lived in traditional two-parent families. They found that out of a primary enrollment of 75, around 20 children had known death, divorce, separation, and sometimes remarriage in their family.

Books like these, then, produced by Before We Are Six of Waterloo, Ontario, do reach out to meet a need. Any class or day-care group these days is likely to have in it children whose family unit is not the traditional one. They need to hear their own kind of experiences given their due when adults read aloud to them or, as they learn to read for themselves, to be able to recognize feelings and situations like their own in that private interchange that takes place between book and reader.

Three of these five books, *Minoo's Family*, *Irene's Idea*, and *Please Michael, That's my Daddy's Chair*, have as their central character a girl, four to six years old, either living happily with her mother and sister in the absence of the father (*Irene's Idea*) or adjusting to his departure (*Minoo's Family*, *Please Michael*). The same mother-daughter relationship is implied in *The Last Visit* by Doug Jamieson (as it happens the only male author in the group), although there the main emphasis is on the complemen-

tary experiences of death and birth. *Families Grow in Different Ways*, the traditional exception in terms of the family situation, has a boy and a girl sharing the excitement of the arrival in each of their families of new baby sisters, one of whom is adopted. In less obvious ways, too, the books reflect the contemporary life-style. The mothers in *Minoo's Family* and *Please Michael* work in a store and an office. The families in four of the books live in high-rise apartment buildings; in *Minoo's Family* the move from the suburban house to the apartment is occasioned by the parents' separation. Cats are three of the little girls' confidantes; Jill in *Please Michael* wishes she had a dog, but realizes that dogs are not happy "living in apartments in tall buildings."

Feelings are stressed, especially feelings that are strong or mixed. For example, when the new friend Michael kisses her mother, Jill "didn't like that too much. It made her shiver." In *The Last Visit*, *Minoo's Family*, and *Please Michael*, anger, loneliness, and sadness alternate with happiness and the comfort to be found in new life and new friends. At times, both children and adults cry:

Michael began to cry a little. He held Jill tightly in his arms. She felt very good sitting so close to Michael.

She was very confused and began to cry a little herself.
(*Please Michael*)

Loyalty to the father who has left is also respected both in this story and in *Minoo's Family*.

For their challenges of the family stereotypes and their attempts to deal with highly charged emotional situations, all of these *Before We Are Six* books are to be commended. It is good to see a Canadian group taking the initiative and publishing books of this kind for children from about four to eight years old (the late pre-school and early primary years). However, the dexterity required in the writing of stories for this level must not be underestimated. The phrasing has to be lucid, without a trace of strain. The text has to relate the incidents without pretension, laboured explanation, or any hint of a patronizing adult tone. In this respect, special pleading, which to some extent these books are, has its own special hazards. None of these books escapes the pitfalls entirely. There are uncertainties of structure, of pace and climax, or of phrasing in all of them.

For example, *The Last Visit*, the most sophisticated structurally and stylistically of the five, has a conclusion that seeks to symbolize the life-giving forces on this day of the grandmother's death and the kittens' birth. But Mary's whispered request to the nursing kitten to "Take a drink for me" is all too likely to leave the young reader puzzled as to its meaning and thus dissatisfied. In *Irene's Idea*, the crucial dream that solves what to do for a father's day card when one has no father occurs somewhat implausibly between Irene's first waking and her hurried departure for school. It also detracts, I think, from the solution to have had a friend use the same idea last year. I would have liked Irene to come upon her idea out of her own experience since she resolves her dilemma by an affirmation of the worth of that experience. In *Families Grow in Different Ways*, the treat-

ment both of natural birth and of adoption seems strained. There is more than a hint of awkwardness in how and when Jamie's mother tells him about her pregnancy. From the next sentence of the story, it would seem that he is already well aware of her news. One hopes that his visit to the hospital to see his mother and new sister will be true to the experience of the children who read this book, but in my experience some hospitals still do not permit young children to visit. The explanation of adoption struck me as too cosy. Realistically, adoption is occasioned by motives and situations less pat than those suggested in the story and the steps involved are lengthier and altogether more rigorous. Granted one does not want to provoke anxiety about unwanted babies or to labour the bureaucratic details, but the appropriate (and exacting) combination of real-life detail and the feelings aroused by such situations is precisely the challenge that authors of stories like these take up. Here, some of that challenge has been abandoned in favour of over-simplification and happy coincidence.

Another difficulty that is not always transcended has to do with pitching the response attributed to the child of five or six who is the central character. There are, I feel, too many assertions made on behalf of Minoo, Jill, even Irene, as to their feeling happy or unhappy. Children of this age are unlikely to be so specific in separating out their feelings and articulating them. Here again the challenge is a complicated one and perhaps has to be met—at least partly—by capturing the intuitive, inchoate vision of the child rather than by imposing the perspective of the self-consciously enlightened adult.

Finally, on details of style and phrasing, *Please Michael*, it seemed to me, failed to solve its tense problem. The distinction between the present and the past (that is, last year when Daddy lived with them) is not maintained throughout the story. At several points in *Minoo's Family*, the sentences could be tightened up with advantage. Some instances of individual word usage may also trouble the adults who use the books. The newborn kittens in *The Last Visit* surely "nuzzled" up to the mother rather than "muzzled." One hesitates over the combination of "much" with "sewing and gardening" in the same book. "Laid down" occurs in *Please Michael* where I would prefer "lay down," and "different than" in *The Last Visit* rather than "different from." But both phrases are so widely used now that one's reaction should perhaps not be over-prescriptive.

Visually, four of the books are bold and attractive with covers of bright orange and brown or yellow and blue. Two are printed in dark blue type on light blue stock and two in dark brown on yellow. The typefaces used are quite large. *Irene's Idea* seemed well-laid-out for the young reader and so did *Minoo's Family*—with the exception of two crowded pages. Some of the illustrations, it must be admitted, have an amateurish quality: the drawing of Irene and Pam in Irene's dream is, to my eye, stiff and dull; Michael in *Please Michael* has a woodenness about him which for some reason is not obtrusive in the drawings of the other characters; I personally did not like the rather unformed face of Jamie's father in *Families Grow in Different Ways*. Some details are also missed: Minoo's truck-driver father drives by night on the wrong side of the

road! On the other hand there are plenty of visual delights. Two of the illustrators, Winnie Mertens (*Please Michael*) and Frances McGlynn (*Irene's Idea, Minoo's Family*) boldly pattern their quilts, cushions and clothes. In *Please Michael*, hair, flowers and leaves are intricately drawn. Both of Frances McGlynn's books use the space on the illustration page imaginatively. Even *Families Grow in Different Ways*, the least successfully illustrated, has one splendid illustration of the two children swinging. The fifth book, *The Last Visit*, is illustrated in a markedly different style. Not only are the drawings boldly black and white, they also have an odd, edge to them. They have power; they even bring to mind the style of Edvard Munch. But they are rather frightening—a child I showed the book to pronounced them creepy and was puzzled by the bare feet—and seem at odds with the intent of the text, which is to reconcile death and birth.

None of these books is the perfect production that one might hope for, indeed *must* hope for. The authors are still feeling their way. The project the group has launched, however, is a worthwhile one, and parents, teachers, and librarians will want to look at these books. If *Before We Are Six* wishes to continue—and I suspect the commercial publisher is reluctant to touch this kind of material—then more resources, especially in design, and opportunities to broaden their understanding of their audience and their task should be made available to the group.

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Early Childhood Education

ALLAN SHELDON

The Learning Environment, Chris Nash. Methuen, 1976. 189 pp. \$6.95 paper.

Chris Nash writes that "Any environment has four dimensions (time, space, people, things), and each dimension can contribute to learning." The central idea in her book is that those involved in Early Childhood Education had better base their work upon an understanding of this concept if the children's learning is to be meaningful. The author begins with the premise that the child can learn and does learn effectively at home because he knows his environment in all of its dimensions, and he plays and learns within these dimensions naturally. If the child finds a toy absorbing he can explore at length uninterrupted. If he doesn't like what is on T.V. he can go find something else. He has many opportunities every day to talk with people, to look at, to play with, and to learn from things. In contrast