

# “Once Upon a Time” . . . By Kids

NOREEN YOUNG

Once upon a time there lived a foot. It was a quirk of nature as it was six feet tall and four and a half feet wide. Everybody feared this foot because it stunk and was horrible looking. (from “The Big Foot” by Philip Shwed, age 10, Ottawa).

The start of a doleful tale? Not so. Mr. Foot happily meets a man who is wearing a gas mask (for no particular reason) and not only do they become friends, but the human constructs a giant worm as a girlfriend for Mr. Foot. Mr. Foot and Miss Worm discover they both adore dancing and fall in love.

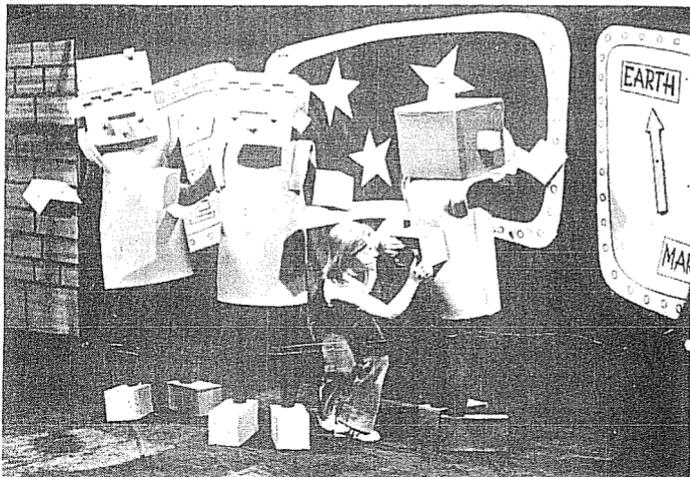
Eventually Mr. Foot and Miss Worm got married and lived happily ever after. And so did the human.

A story about a worm and a foot and a man in a gas mask? Of course! And many other stories, such as a China ship and a French ship exchanging gifts in a harbour; a King called Rodger who, when a large egg is dropped on his head, is called King Rotten Egg forevermore; the Baloney Man who learns to love soup when all the baloney in the world has gone; and Mr. Nose who must wear a false nose to hide his own “big, warty, twisted, squishy nose.”

These delightfully unique stories and many others were written by children aged 9 to 12 and were part of a thirteen-programme children’s television series introduced this season. Produced by CBOT Ottawa for the CBC Network, *Pencil Box* invites children to participate in a television programme which presents their own creations. The objective is to stimulate and encourage young story writers. Naturally there is an underlying intention that the programme be entertaining to all children, whether or not they contribute. Thus the stories written by children are presented to their peers through a variety of techniques—actors, masks, film, animation, puppets, drawings done by children, graphics, scenery and all the electronic effects available through the medium of television. To demonstrate to the young writers that their stories are important, the greatest care is taken throughout production. What *Pencil Box* is offering is a *visual* enactment of children’s writing. Though the stories must necessarily be adapted into script form for television, this is done by a professional writer who is respectful of and sensitive to the original creation.

For *Pencil Box’s* initial season, stories were solicited from children of Grades V and VI in ten Ottawa and area schools. As these were class projects, many boys and girls undoubtedly responded who would not normally have done so on their own. The quality of response was so good, however, that 95 stories—which were selected primarily on the basis of originality—were adapted for the first series. They varied greatly in length and composition. Some were

adaptations from story books, films or television; others were reflective of home or everyday events; a good proportion, however, responded to our search for and belief in the imagination and originality of children. Some intriguing titles of stories chosen were: "The One-Eyed Monster", "Freddy Frog Meets Spy Fly", "The Day My Hen Laid an Egg", "Mr. Tomato and His Boasting", "The Amazing Sneakers", "The Island of Hamburger", "The Immovable Thing" and "The Doctor and Ping Pong".



**"THE FLYING OBJECT"**  
by Richard MacFarlane, Ottawa



**"THE DOG, THE CAT, & THE MAGIC ROCK"**  
by Vickie LaCroix, Ottawa

The 95 stories were grouped so that each of the thirteen programmes held an average of eight stories with running time from one minute to five minutes. A thin thread of continuity tied the stories together, and each programme contained an invitation to boys and girls across Canada to send in *their* story. This new input would form the basis of our second season.

After the programme series was launched in September of 1976, response was awaited with high expectancy and some apprehension. What would the mail response be and what would the stories be like? Would they reflect regional differences? Would children enjoy watching a programme made up of other children's stories? Would the writers react favourably to the adaptations of their stories?

During the period of September to January, more than 1800 stories arrived on Producer Rod Holmes' desk. They came from all provinces of Canada and some northern American states, with Ontario's writers as the most prolific, Newfoundland's next and Saskatchewan's a close third. Correspondence came from small centres such as Shoal Lake, Manitoba; Spiritwood, Saskatchewan; Amisk, Alberta; Manitouwadge, Ontario; and Pollards Point, Newfoundland; as well as larger centres including Charlottetown, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Montreal, Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto. The majority of letters, however, came from young writers in smaller centres, among them some very remote parts of Canada. School teachers, as well, took up the invitation, and whole classes sent in stories in large, bulky envelopes. It was decided to pick 100 of these stories for our 1977 season. They were chosen on three bases: first, originality reflecting the writer's departure from any formula; second, interest to other children; and third, maintaining a variety of subject material. More than 200 qualified, but the 100 chosen represent the cream; if the programme proves to be a successful experiment, hopefully it will be expanded to a 26-week series so that the work of more young writers can be shown.

For me as the series creator and for our professional writer, Juli Voyer, reading through the precious bundle of mail each week was like looking for treasure. I looked forward to it with great anticipation, and if the growing number of stories had to be left aside because of other necessary work, they sat "burning" on the table until I could get back to them. From the stories we read, we found no great regional differences in the interests of Canadian children, although it was noticeable that many horse stories came to us from Saskatchewan and that Newfoundland was the source of many ghost stories.

Among the 1800 stories favourite topics were in these general categories:

Haunted Houses . . . . . witches, ghosts, skeletons, Dracula-like creatures.  
Animals . . . . . dogs, cats, birds—and we got a lot of moose stories!  
Space . . . . . rockets, astronauts, outerspace creatures.  
Detectives . . . . . spies, mysteries, murders.  
Friendship . . . . . loneliness.

Superheroes	.....	crime fighters.
Magic	.....	wizards, wishes, getting sm
Monsters	.....	Sasquatch, dinosaurs.
Animated Objects	..	shoes, teeth, scissors.
Machines	.....	computers, robots.
Disasters.	.....	plane crashes, fire, war.

Also, certain "story formulas" emerged. For example, when entering a haunted house the door always slams shut on its own, trapping children inside. When exploring the inside of a rocket the rocket always takes off and the children are shot into space. Many stories of children in danger end, "and then I woke up". The power for making wishes always disappears or is taken away. And of course "They lived happily ever after" appears many, many times.

Girl writers outnumbered boy writers but they wrote stories with boys as the central figures, whereas boys rarely wrote about girls except as supporting characters. Perhaps because they were from children who participated voluntarily, it was also noticeable that the stories in the second season were generally more complete in their structure than those of the initial season. Surprisingly, some excellent stories came from teenagers aged 13 to 15, and this is beyond our original target of ages 9 to 12. Some of the stories were exceptional, and this led us to conclude that boys and girls of all ages need outlets for creative writing. It is most satisfying that *Pencil Box* helps to fill that need.

Within the 100 stories now selected for *Pencil Box '77*, there is a wide range of subject material. Among them are:

"*Pizza*" (by Heidi Schmidt, age 9, from Burstall, Saskatchewan). The story of a little girl named Alice who loves pizzas so much she finally turns into a pepperoni, sausage, onion, olive, garlic, ginger, pickle and fruit pizza!

"*The Paratrooper*" (by Chris Warwick, age 12, from Charlottetown, P.E.I.). The realistic and frightening experiences of Bob Darby, who is dropped into enemy territory in the dead of night as part of the mass invasion plan, D-Day, June 6th, 1944.

"*The New Colt*" (by Kimberly Stanchuk, age 13, from Birtle, Manitoba). A sensitive and gentle account of the birth of a colt as narrated by the mare.

"*Why People Cannot Fly*" (by Clara Isaac, age 12, from Beechy, Saskatchewan). A tale of how once upon a time people could fly and birds could not. Then people lose the knack of flying when birds discover the secret and take over the skies.

"*My Mysterious Husband*" (by Janeen McCarthy, age 11, from Prince George, B.C.). A young teenaged girl is forced to decide between marrying Dracula's son or having her blood sucked out. She agrees to marry—on one condition. There is to be no necking!

"*The Ottawa River Monster*" (by Bob Jones, age 13, Ottawa, Ontario). A river saga in verse which begins:

"In the Ottawa River, down in the slime,  
Lives a big bad monster covered with grime.  
He weighs 6 tons and is 60 feet long  
And he's easy to find, cause his odor's so strong."

To some people, reading 1800 stories may sound like tedious work. It does take a lot of time to sift through them because each story must be given fair attention, but for someone wishing to be in touch with children's interests and outlook, it is a fascinating experience. The stories inevitably reflect some of the thoughts and fantasies of modern children and confirm that the world of children is a private place. They see things from a special perspective which cuts through pretensions and proves that imagination is alive and well. For adults involved in writing for children or entertaining them in any way, reading stories like these is like touching base with childhood again. With *Pencil Box* we do not wish to intrude into the private world of children but rather to show our interest as professionals in their writing and to offer encouragement to them.

There are final questions—"Will children enjoy watching a programme made up of other children's stories?" We have only just begun to answer these questions. Initial B.B.M. Ratings (Board of Broadcast Measurements) for *Pencil Box*'s first series were satisfying and prove there is an audience of boys and girls who are interested in stories of their peers. Young writers from whom we have received feedback were satisfied with their story adaptations, and it is most encouraging that some have submitted new stories for the 1977 series.

And so you have *Pencil Box*: a most interesting programme to be involved in and, hopefully, one in which more and more children will wish to participate. May it live "happily ever after" (in television terms).

*Noreen Young, the creator of Pencil Box, is a freelance puppeteer involved in children's programming primarily with the CBC and TV Ontario. Two of her plays for children, The Valiant Tailor and Pickles and Puppets (written with Juli Voyer), have been published by the Playwrights Co-op.*