

# Nature in Small Children's Books

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*Amanda Grows Up*, Norma M. Charles. Illustrated by Carol Moran. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1976. 48 pp. \$1.30 paper.

*The Pollywog Who Didn't Believe*, A. P. Campbell. Illustrated by Andrea Campbell. Borealis Press, 1975. 21 pp. \$4.95 paper.

*I Am A Duck*, M. G. Wilkins. Illustrated by Jeff Wakefield. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1975. 44 pp. \$1.05 paper.

*In My Back Yard*, John DeVries. Illustrated by Jeff Wakefield. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1975. 56 pp. \$1.05 paper.

These four stories for young children all deal with small wild growing things. In *Amanda Grows Up*, Nature's growth cycle is delightfully portrayed in this story of Amanda, a young hazelnut, who begins life in the spring as a tiny green speck in the top of a tree in the park. She grows unnoticed by children or birds, until in May she is a smooth, green hazelnut, hanging among many others who soon become her friends. The summer is spent dancing in the wind. As fall approaches, many of Amanda's friends jump to the ground and to new adventure. Afraid to jump, Amanda remains on the tree until her loneliness becomes unbearable. Jumping down in search of her friends, she lands in tall grass from which she cannot escape. Snow comes and Amanda snuggles down to sleep the winter out. In the spring, she awakes hungry and thirsty, and reaches down for water and up to the sun, thus discovering that she is no longer a nut, but is now a young tree.

The illustrations are imaginative, brightly coloured with soft shading. The changing seasons are emphasized by the use of line and colour: the summer pictures give a feeling of action and growth; winter's quiet is shown by the use of blues and greys and predominately horizontal lines; the spring pictures are full of bright colours with the lines indicating an upward growing motion. And the hazelnuts are slightly personified with simple, expressive facial features.

The story, though brief, provides enough information about the growth cycle to be useful for teaching purposes in the very early grades. In addition, it deals with the universal concept of the cycle of nature in a way that is entertaining for preschoolers.

Growth is handled in a different way in *The Pollywog Who Didn't*

*Believe.* The story, narrated in rhyme, tells of the development of a pollywog into a frog. Stubborn young Gubby will not believe when his friends tell him that he will soon be a frog. Since frogs don't swim or have tails as he does, he thinks it more likely that he will be a whale. As the summer passes, young Gubby grows shorter and develops bulges over his eyes. Still he does not believe that he will be a frog. One day, his friend, Fat Jim, disappears. The other tell him that Jim has become a frog, but again Gubby does not believe. A fierce September storm tosses Gubby and his brothers and sisters far out of the water where, exhausted, they sleep through the night.

In the morning young Gubby  
Awoke with a stare:  
He reached for the water  
And only got air!

A. P. Campbell, author of *Kaki Wahoo, the Little Indian Who Walked on his Head*, has taken an innovative approach to an educational topic. Unfortunately, the result is not as successful as might have been expected. The poetry, though rhythmical, does not always run smoothly, occasionally giving the feeling that a word or as idea has been strained to fit. The use of some difficult words and images ("Plato-like grin," "mustered") makes the book difficult for young children to read. Although the author mentions the nine-week development period and the physical changes taking place in the pollywog as it matures, nevertheless the reader is left with the unfortunate impression that the storm changes the pollywogs to frogs. As the storm (referred to as Carol) approaches,

All Gubby's sisters  
There clutched in a knot  
Whispered and whimpered  
As the tempest grew hot:  
"The thunder will make us  
All froggies you'll see"  
And they hugged their poor tailies  
And wept in the sea.

This misleading impression detracts from the book even though some facts are given.

The illustrations, a child's original and creative drawings, are refreshingly simple. The illustrator puts human heads on the pollywogs and frogs. This bit of anthropomorphism is in one sense acceptable since the young pollywogs seem human when they sneer, brag, stare and shout in slangy child fashion. In another sense, however, the anthropomorphism detracts from the educational value. The illustrations are done totally in green crayon and lack visual impact. Generally I feel

the book would have been more successful had it concentrated on being a creative story without attempting to “stuff in” the facts.

The other two books deal with the relationship between human beings and nature. In *I Am A Duck*, Simon wants to become a duck so much that he can think of nothing else. This fixation leads to trouble when he quacks in school and must stay late to write five hundred times, “I must not quack in school”. One night after Simon cracks his head on the bookshelf above his bed, he awakes to find himself inside a smooth, round, dark container. Presumably prepared for this by his imagination, he cracks open the egg and discovers that he is, indeed, a duck.

However, his excitement over a dream come true soon diminishes as he discovers some of the difficulties of leading a duck’s life. Swimming becomes a tiring exercise because he keeps paddling around in circles. A wise old drake, looking suspiciously like Daffy Duck, warns him about duckloving pike, snapping turtles, water snakes, eagles, hawks, and—most formidable—men with shotguns. With growing dismay, Simon searches for his broken shell. After crawling in and pulling the shell together over him, he next wants to be a moose. The theme of the story is an old one, already the subject of many pictures for young children who are developing their self-image. Wanting to be someone else but finding out that it is not always fun is the theme of Jack Kent’s *Just Only John*, a more successful treatment than *I Am A Duck*. However, *I Am A Duck* does have an innovative ending, for Simon does not “learn his lesson” and comes out of the frightening experience not determined to be himself, but determined to be a moose. Very young children may miss the humour and significance of this ending. Adults, however, realize that children do not always learn the lesson intended and, in fact, sometimes learn something entirely unintended. Yet, Simon’s choice, to be a moose, seems incongruous. One might have expected Simon to choose to be an eagle, or hawk, or some other predator mentioned in the story.

The yellow, brown, and black cartoon illustrations are simple line drawings which greatly add to the humour of the story. Simon is shown as a mop-headed, freckled-faced kid with a Peanuts-shaped body and a generally personable air. As with many Scholastic-TAB publications, the text is on the left and the illustrations on the right. This is not a serious fault as the text is substantial and gives a sense of balance to the page. The theme of this story is suitable for children in the five to seven year range who can identify with Simon and enjoy the humour.

In the last book, *In My Back Yard*, a young boy finds a frog in his backyard and names him Jim. His desire to keep Jim is thwarted by his mother (“Get rid of him!”), by his father (“Take him away!”),

by his grandfather who sleeps through the crisis, and by his sister who nearly runs Jim down with her bicycle. About to give up, he decides to try his dog, Rover. Jim is installed as a roomer in Rover's house which is already full of paraphernalia such as stuffed animals, nails, chains, balls and rags. As the text lists the items, the illustrations show Rover becoming increasingly agitated by Jim's hopping about. With "his chain and my ring" Rover is shown entangled in the chain with the ring caught over his nose. Jim crouches on top of Rover with a mournful face that seems to ask "What did I do now?" Finally Rover controls the situation by pinning poor Jim down gently with his paw.

The story is written in rhymed lines with one line per page. The first part of the poem flows smoothly, building momentum. However, once the frog is installed in the dog house, the poem loses impetus without providing the expected excitement and becomes simply a cataloging of items: "with his bowl and my pail, . . . with his box and and my nail, . . . with his rod and my reel . . . his rake and my wheel." Some practical young children might object to the fact that all these items could not possibly fit into Rover's house. The latter part of the poem is sustained by the illustrations which show how the frog succeeds in entangling himself and Rover in the mess of articles in the house. The red and green illustrations with pencil shadings are droll and expressive. The young boy is again, as in *I Am A Duck*, a mop-headed, dusty, freckle-faced universal boy with untied laces and patched jeans. Wakefield depicts the frog as one who is bewildered and worried by the situation in which he finds himself, and he manipulates a simple circle and dot for the eyes, always leaving Jim looking slightly cross-eyed and confused. This technique of illustrating eyes is also used by Jack Kent in many of his stories (i.e., *The Blah*). Rover is shown as a mournful, long-eared, awkward dog who is somewhat overwhelmed by the presence of his new room-mate. The print is large and the vocabulary simple, thus suiting the book to beginning readers. The theme, that of the pet unwanted by parents, is a common and popular one with young children. This version is less successful than Steven Kellogg's *Can I Keep Him?* or *No Ducks in Our Bathtub* by Martha Alexander, but it will be enjoyed by young children because of its expressive illustrations.