

tegrated the audience's own worldawareness (whether of Tokyo or Calgary) into a *mélange* of songs, dance, and dramatic vignette.

In her introduction to this collection Betty Jean Lifton calls children "shape shifters" and she has in her choice of scripts for the anthology been faithful to her assertion that a child can deal, both at the levels of story and theatrical technique, with the concept of the multiple self. These eight plays are among the richest available to the contemporary children's theatre producer.

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The Wooden People As Introduction to Literary Study

JACQUELINE HUNT

The Wooden People, Myra Paperny. Illustrated by Ken Stampnick. Little Brown, 1976. 168 pp. \$6.95 cloth.

Novels for young teenagers tend to reflect in somewhat diluted form the concerns of the older adolescent and adult world. During and following the upheavals of the 1960's, there was a great flood of "realistic" stories, often dealing in stark terms with social problems foisted upon the young by the tumultuous adult world. All too often these stories presented reality in bleak terms, depicted a cold unloving world, and showed the young caught up in bitter family conflict. All too often the inadvertent message emerged that parents are either uncaring or inadequate, and the young must find their own values, at best without parental support, at worst in the face of parental abuse. The old-fashioned family story seemed a thing of the past, and writers concerned with verities other than current social ills turned to historical or science fiction.

But times change. The young do not welcome being constantly harrowed by problems and suffering. There is, if you like, a backlash against contemporary social realism that is being reflected in a new ripple of nostalgic stories set in the 1920's and 1930's when the physical realities of life were harsher, but its psychological complexities less

bewildering. In such settings, it seems possible to depict family life infused with love and concern. Such a story is Myra Paperny's *The Wooden People*.

The story is set in Western Canada of the 1920's, and the chief protagonists are thirteen-year-old Lisa and twelve-year-old Teddy. As the two older Stein children, they have perhaps suffered most from the family peregrinations occasioned by their immigrant father's ambition to get ahead in the new country. They too are most sensitive to their differentness, again occasioned by Papa's Old World ways and strictures, not to mention his explosive temper. But whereas Teddy rebels in blind and bitter fury, Lisa, from whose point of view the story is told, is attuned to her father's sensitive and ebullient love of life and of his little brood.

As the story opens, the Stein family is once again about to move, this time from the Okanagan Valley to a tiny village in Alberta. Teddy, furious at yet another uprooting, determines to make no new friends, and circumstances contrive to enforce his isolation. He becomes fascinated by puppets (the wooden people of the title), partly because he shares his father's histrionic flair, and partly because they afford a safe attachment. His enthusiasm infects the other children, and the marionettes are soon an all-consuming interest. Village children come to applaud performances, all conducted in the utmost secrecy, for among Papa's idiosyncracies is an impatience with all "frivolities," especially the theatre.

The climax is reached when the children risk a public performance, but at this moment of triumph, Papa discovers and humiliates them. Happily, before the end, he redeems himself in the eyes both of his children and of the reader.

The novel is beautifully constructed, each of the early incidents weaving together elements of the plot, pictures of life in the 1920's, and sensitive insights into the conflicts always at play in family life. The opening incident introduces an enterprising pre-TV pair as they are about to launch their latest creation, a boat made with friends from bits and pieces scrounged from local sources. Teddy, the daredevil, intends to stay aboard during the maiden voyage, but fortunately is dissuaded by the more sensible Lisa. Then, in a subtle bit of foreshadowing, Papa arrives to turn their elation to embarrassment as he splutters incoherently over this latest bit of folly. His remonstrances are interrupted by a further disaster: the boat begins to list, turns turtle, and vanishes beneath the waves, symbolizing in a way the sinking of Teddy's hopes.

Another incident occurs soon after the family is settled in their new home. Teddy goes with a companion (he is not yet ready to admit

friendship) to investigate a nearby creek. As evening approaches, there is a sharp temperature drop, and Lisa, left in charge while their parents are on a buying trip in Edmonton, becomes increasingly apprehensive. Finally a frozen figure staggers down the road. Teddy had fallen in the creek and had been caught dripping wet by the unpredictable Alberta fall weather. During the night, Teddy's fever soars as he develops the pneumonia that will keep him home for months. The sense of fear and isolation is keenly developed as Lisa tries to calm her delirious brother with nothing more than aspirin and cold compresses, in a village that boasts neither doctor nor drugstore.

One of the most notable features of the book is the depth of characterization of the father. Passages conveying with total honesty the children's embarrassment and fury over his outrageous behavior are interspersed with incidents that reveal a gentler side of the man. In a subtle scene as Teddy's illness reaches a crisis, the reader is given a fleeting glimpse of a father's deep and anxious love for a difficult son, and of Lisa's perceptive awareness of his need for comfort.

She disentangled herself from the octopus of arms around Mama and hesitantly moved across the room. When she stood before her father she regretted her gesture. He hadn't noticed her. He slumped in his chair. "Papa, Teddy asked for you last night," she stammered.

"He really did?" She nodded her head. But then another thought occurred to him. "And I wasn't there to help him."

Had she made things worse by her remark? She could almost taste the bitterness in his voice. Quickly she continued. "And he said what a wonderful fishing spot he's found down by that stream and he'd like to tell you about it."

Papa almost smiled then and rose from the chair. "Hear that, Esther? He asked for me. There's something special about Teddy." Then, as if responding to some preset signal, both parents left the room, Mama to arrange dinner and Papa to check with his clerk.

In his good moments, Papa is an inspired story teller, and although most begin with "When I was a boy . . ." (a line children will recognize with glee), the stories always captivate. True, his rages are unreasonable and uninhibited, but Lisa at least discovers they can be diverted into story telling.

The picture emerges of a warm if explosive personality, and the message, if there is one, suggests that although family life is beset with difficulties, it has its moments of joy.

In the controversy over the merits of adolescent novels, one argument used by educators in their favor is that they provide

interesting relevant stories around which discussion of structure and style can be evolved. Thus they provide useful stepping stones for study of adult novels at more senior levels.

Like all good novels, *The Wooden People* is difficult to categorize as either a children's or an adolescent novel, but it seems to me ideally suited for study at an 8th grade level. Many thirteen-year-olds are just beginning to read beneath the surface, to sense why characters seem so real, to comprehend the complexities of conflict and the subtlety of devices such as foreshadowing. Myra Paperny's novel offers not only a compelling reading experience for this age group, but a rich mine for junior high school English teachers.

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Edible Letters

MARY FORD

The Alphavegetabet, Louise Ellis. Illustrated by the author. Collier-MacMillan Canada Ltd., 1976. 52 pp. \$6.95 cloth.

Alphabet books have been around for a long time. They are usually written for the pre-school age child for the express purpose of giving him (or her) an entertaining and informative introduction to one of the basic reading skills, phonics. It would be difficult to classify alphabet books as "literature" for most of them have a very simple text and are often dominated by large and colorful illustrations.

But now there is an alphabet book on the scene which stands out from all the rest and should be recognized for its originality and the determination of its author to give, as Chaucer said, "sentence and solace". It is Louise Ellis' *The Alphavegetabet*, a book which offers the child an ambitious tour through the vegetable kingdom describing each item in verse and illustrating it with intricately detailed, though somewhat primitive pen and ink sketches.