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.

Curious though the child may be about the mysterious workings of the alphabet, about why *e* must always follow *d* and precede *f*, he will have his curiosity stretched to the limit if he muses long on the idiosyncrasies of the vegetable world. Vegetables just will not be classified neatly into twenty-six separate packages from *A* to *Z*.

Despite the most industrious efforts of the author, the vegetables will not oblige and so she has been forced, on occasion, to choose the unusual—hops and jerusalem artichoke. Sometimes necessity has led her to furrows far removed from the familiar world of her audience. She travelled to Peru, for example, to find the *q* vegetable quinoa, and to gardens under the sea for the *k* vegetable kelp.

Even though these slightly esoteric offerings can still be legitimately connected with the legume family, author Ellis encountered some real difficulties with the letters *u, i* and *x*. With *i* and *x* her response was surrender. She chose vegetable-flavoured ice-cream for the letter *i,* and for *x* she suggested that if vegetables were x-rayed their various character traits might come to light. Here Ellis is at her weakest, for not only does she mis-represent the powers of x-ray, but she suggests, quite fancifully, that "potatoes get jealous," "ferns feel flighty," that "beets tend to weep" and that "the patience of the parsnips can run rather deep". After this x-rayed psycho-analysis of the vegetable family resulting in their being endowed with human characteristics, how could a child possibly want to eat the patient parsnip or the beet that weeps?

For all this capitulation to frivolity, Ellis shows real wit in her treatment of the difficult letter *u*. Here, in the manner of Dr. Seuss, she simply invents a vegetable: the urd bean. Her illustration page is left blank as she admits in verse:

> Have you ever seen
> a real urd bean?
> My, oh my,
> neither have I!

Given the acknowledged difficulty of her task, the limited number of vegetables from which to choose, and the necessity for making her work both informative and entertaining, Ellis has done a commendable job. Still, there are some problems.

How does the parent, teacher or librarian determine for what age-group this book is best suited?

It is an alphabet book; therefore the assumption is made that it is for the pre-school age child, but the vocabulary and the rather sophis-

ticated expectations seem to place the book in the 7-9 age group. My independent tests revealed that the best response was gained when *The Alphavegetabet* was read to the child between 7 and 9. Younger children lost interest.

Just as the vocabulary is an important criterion in determining the "holding power" of a children's book, so too is the verse. The author has employed numerous varieties of rhyme, meter and length and although the verses do not have the unity or the chanting rhythmical repetition that children love in Dr. Seuss, most of them are a skilful mixture of information and entertainment.

"Kernels of truth" and "corny old verse" are examples of a rather self-conscious cleverness in the description of *c* vegetable, corn. Ellis is much more informative and just as entertaining, however, when she describes the *a* vegetable artichoke:

> The artichoke is sure no joke—
> it's related, you see, to the thistle:
> 'Tis truly an art to get to the heart
> without getting choke in your whistle.
>
> They've sharp little prickles that turn into tickles
> (all the more on the ones that are fatter)
> But don't be suspicious—they're really delicious
> just get to the heart of the matter.

Let us (no pun intended on the vegetable) now consider the illustrations. Each alphabet letter is accompanied by a verse and a full-page drawing. The drawings have been carefully executed by the author in pen and ink with meticulous detail. A frog pokes his head out of the pocket of a young boy examining a jerusalem artichoke; a woman enjoying a garlic sandwich wears a necklace with a pendant looking astonishingly like a garlic bud; yet another shows the slightly wrinkled zipper in the back of a shopper's printed dress.

More noticeable than the detail, however, is Ellis' seeming dedication to ugliness. All of her figures are squat, most of them have broad full moon faces, and many of them display imperfections of a gross nature:pop-eyes, jutting chins, protruding noses, buck teeth.

Now I am not suggesting that illustrations for children's books should not be realistic, but when the ugliness is so over-whelming that it detracts from the text, the art work should be re-examined.

Other than these minor reservations, I found the book to be, on the whole, very satisfying.

Perhaps it should also be said that aesthetically *The Alphavegetabet* is a pleasing book. It measures 8" x 10", so is large enough for children to handle without being cumbersome. The jacket and pages are a buff color, the print is a large and easy-to-read brown, while the alphabet letters which top every page are a pleasing green.

Quite reasonably priced, the book sells for $6.95.

Realizing that all I can possibly say about *The Alphavegetabet* I have now said, I must

Surely

Terminate

Unnecessary

Verbiage

With

X-Yelled*

Zest

* The penultimate word is of the author's invention.

Mary Ford is a previous contributor to CCL. *Her article entitled "The Wolf as Victim" appeared in issue 7.*