

Margaret Atwood: Can. Lit. to Kid Lit.

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Up in the Tree, Margaret Atwood. Illus. by the author. McClelland and Stewart, 1978. 30 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Up in the Tree is the first book for children by Margaret Atwood, an author already well-known to adult readers of Canadian literature for her award-winning poetry and fiction and her provocative criticism. This book, illustrated and hand-lettered by the author, is inscribed to her daughter, Jess.

The book tells the story of two children's special home in a tree, from a child's perspective. The children are probably a boy and a girl, though their sex can be deduced only from their hairstyles, not from their dress or behaviour. They remain nameless, a fact which invites all young readers to participate in the joys and troubles described.

The tree is a kind of private world for the pair and while it's "fun in the sun," it can be something of "a pain in the rain," despite the umbrellas with which they are happily supplied. They enjoy the tree through all the seasons, swinging on its limbs and crawling and dancing along its branches. It is a world in which the pair encounter problems which they can deal with on their own, such as the wind:

When it Blows,
Don't fall off,
Don't wriggle or cough,
Hold tight to the branches
Way up in the tree

and some they cannot:

WHAT'S THIS WE SEE?
OH MY! OH ME!
Someone's taken the LADDER
Away from the tree!

Stranded in the tree after some very hungry porcupines make a meal of their ladder, the children become aware of their limited resources:

Oh no! Oh no!
There's nowhere to go!
There's no one to talk to
And nothing to see,
And there's no more hot water
Up here in our tree!

Oh moan! Oh groan!
There's no telephone!
We've run out of pancakes,
We've run out of tea,
We'll have to eat LEAVES
Up here in our tree!

The vision of the tree changes under these circumstances and the children ask:

Are we stuck here
F O R E V E R
In this HORRIBLE TREE?

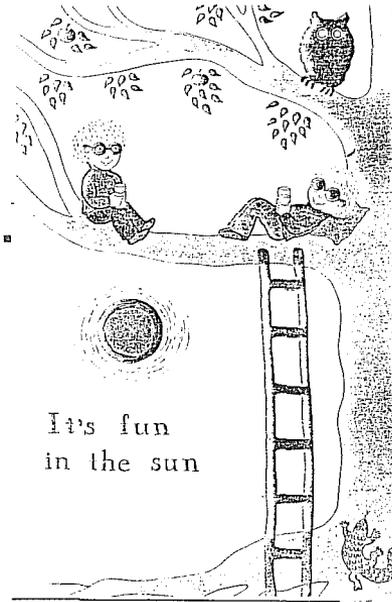
When their own resources fail, a fine red bird comes to their rescue, flying them to safety and restoring their spirits.

WE ARE FREE!!
WE ARE FREE!!
We don't NEED a ladder
With a friend in the tree!

Once more on the ground, the children look with longing back up at the tree which has been the source of so much pleasure, and they resolve to make their home more safely accessible by building permanent stairs. This accomplished, they can snuggle happily into their beds on the boughs and fall peacefully asleep.

The story line and vocabulary are kept at a simple level so that they will appeal to children just beginning to explore the pleasures of books. The poetry, however, seems singularly unremarkable for so accomplished a poet as Atwood, and the chief delight to be derived from the book lies in the very fine illustrations. They add dimensions to the story that make it a much richer experience than it would otherwise be. An owl that goes unmentioned in the text is the children's constant companion in the tree and he is made a part of their world in a number of humorous ways. Just as the young ones enjoy their "fun in the sun" with the help of sunglasses, so too the owl has his sun specs. (See Illustration A). He capers with them when they dance, is blown about by the wind as they are and stares down all agog at the porcupines feeding on the ladder. When the children are feeling frightened by being stranded in the tree, the owl flies off, and though the text does not indicate this, it seems to be he who brings back the red bird to help his friends get to the ground. He assists, too, in the construction of the stairs by holding a bucket of nails.

The illustrations have an emotive power almost entirely lacking in the verse. For example, the stranded children's fear is made vividly concrete by the blank, gaping spaces between the boughs and the cold blues of the tree, moon and bat. Even the owl that has hitherto been a friend seems to be flying away, heedless of their plight. But the joy of rescue is heralded by the warm reds of the following illustration in which the distant moon has given way to the rising sun and the children are no longer alone, for the friendly owl flies close to their heads once more.



A unique and delightful whimsy is captured in the facial expressions and postures of the children and animals in the story. The two satiated porcupines who leave the scant remains of the ladder behind them are pictured rubbing their well-rounded tummies as they waddle off with a gratified smile, while above them the children, with down-turned mouths, watch in dismay.

Graphically, the book is innovative and appealing: it breaks away from the standard black-type format and uses lettering with the human touch. The printing is largely done in blues, but reds and browns are used for special emphasis, so that "WE ARE FREE!! WE ARE FREE!!" is announced not only in bold face capitals, but in the same joyous red as the rescuing bird's feathers. Placed above the shining red sun and high over the tree that had become such a frightening spot for the pair, the positioning of the lines has a symbolic importance as well. Throughout the book, the text is well spaced and attractively and thoughtfully laid out.

There is, however, a very disturbing aspect to this book, one that would make it necessary for a young child to be cautioned against imitating the children in everything they do. When they want to return to their home in the tree after their ladder has been destroyed, the pair build a "staircase" of footholds up the trunk. They reach the upper levels by placing a chair on a small table on the tree's roots (See Illustration B) which is surely a most dangerous and unfortunate solution to their problem. It would be my hope that if this book is ever reprinted, Ms. Atwood will revise this particular aspect of her story, so that this unhappy suggestion to impressionable minds is removed.



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