Shakespeare Takes a Bath

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Shakespeare and the Flying Bed, Mark Coté. Illus. by the author. Magook Publishers Limited, 1979. 32 pp. $6.95 cloth.

The Ordinary Bath, Dennis Lee. Illus. by Jon McKee. Magook Publishers Limited, 1979. 48 pp. $8.95 cloth.

Dennis Lee's writing for children has the sort of demonic energy four-year-olds express when they jump on mattresses and crayon on walls. It is also rather vulgar. Lee delights in an exuberant tastelessness bound to offend those grownups who see nothing funny in jokes about elephant snot or diarrhea, or in the shouted repetition of the word "pantihose" in a public place. Personally, I think such things are hilarious, and I'm happy to know what is long and green and hangs from trees. (And it isn't pantihose.)

The graphic design Frank Newfeld created for Lee's three earlier books of poems for children acted as a check on Lee's exuberance. Newfeld carefully boxed in Lee's poems. He also diluted some of Lee's most intense images. A boy chased by a sasquatch, who says,

> My friends are going to stare and grin
> When they observe the shape I'm in

turns out, in Newfeld's picture, to be merely naked, and not the bloody clawmarked mess one might have imagined. And for Newfeld, the infamous "garbage delight" is not a nauseatingly amorphous combination of everything imaginable, but merely a lot of different foods appetizingly spread on the same table. Newfeld's care and control made Lee's excesses safer and easier to accept.

Jon McKee's illustrations for *The Ordinary Bath* are just as unrestrained and exuberantly tasteless as Lee's text is; and the combination of Lee and McKee is more satisfying than the combination of Lee and Newfeld.

The Ordinary Bath is about the same thing many of Lee's poems are about – the boundaries between freedom and anarchy. Forbidden too much bathwater by a mother who doesn't want her bathroom messed up, a young boy defiantly turns on the tap himself. But instead of water he gets a bathtub creature, who seems to represent both his ability to imagine and his

desire for unrepressed freedom. The creature shouts, "We can dance! We can dive in the tub! and we're going to have FUN!" And FUN they have, as more and more weird creatures pour out of the tap. But our hero seems to understand the danger of too much giving in to oneself; he curbs his own wildness by making the creatures who emerge from the tap progressively nastier, until "one came spouting flames till the sea caught fire," and even worse, "one splashed me hard." Finally, something like Armageddon is happening in the bathtub, and even the first creature who appeared complains, "WHY did you turn on that tap?" The boy has no choice but to be rid of the creatures, and return the bath, and himself, to "ordinary." Apparently he knows both how to use his imagination to help him past some of the stumblingblocks of reality (such as mothers), and when to curb it. And also *how* to curb it – it is his old favorite "duck of a million tubs", the only remaining vestige of the ordinary in the midst of Armageddon, who finally pulls the plug and returns things to normal.

McKee's illustrations of this deliciously scary story make no attempt to restrain its impact. In fact, they make the story even more frighteningly exuberant than it already is. McKee's pictures fill the page; the words almost disappear in them, rather than being carefully separated from them. Furthermore, when Lee tells us merely that his hero said "rude things," McKee depicts them. They include a smelly sock, a warty hog, and what looks suspiciously like a pile of excrement. Lee's creature who "stank" is also excremental, and in McKee's version, the creature with "bumps" has to live with the nauseating fact that its pimples all have faces. Finally, McKee depicts a scary vision of total war in the bathtub, in which the creatures attack each other in mindless chaos; the many bathtub creatures at this point include a messianic Dennis Lee in a diving mask, a killer TV set, and both Ahab and the White Whale.

This unrestrained energy is both freeing and frightening; and that, of course, is what the book is about. McKee allows Lee's theme its full expression. He controls it only when it ought to be controlled, by putting speeches about "ordinary" behaviour into balloons, on white backgrounds clearly separate from the rest of the words and the rest of the picture. Most of these balloons appear at the beginning and end of the bok, before and after the anarchy happens; and the few in the middle contain "ordinary" language that tries to control the anarchy – for instance, a whistlelike creature, who apparently speaks in mother's voice, says, "Two Minutes More" in balloons.

Lee himself also controls, and therefore provides his readers the security to enjoy, the anarchy of his story. While the book is not a poem, it occasionally expresses itself in poetic rhythms. The orderliness of these balances the anarchy being described, and McKee really lets himself go wherever Lee creates a rhythmic pattern.

All picture books are perverse combinations of two arts quite different from each other; good picture books understand the difference and take

advantage of it, so that words and pictures support and complete each other. The words and pictures in *The Ordinary Bath* do just that.

The hardest thing to believe about *Shakespeare and the Flying Bed* is that it was put out by the same people who published *The Ordinary Bath*; Tiffany's do not sell Blue Mountain Pottery. I suppose a book by a young teenager is a cute gimmick, although the sexy picture of young Coté in tight jeans and bare feet on the jacket seems designed to appeal more to young ladies of an age to prefer Judith Krantz and *her* flying beds to Shakespeare and *his*. But the picture book is a complex art form, as *The Ordinary Bath* shows, and it takes more than pretty feet and a summer spent drawing in the Magook office. As it happens, Coté does show some signs of talent – enough talent, I would guess, to be very embarrassed someday by the mere existence of this very embarrassing book.

What Coté inevitably lacks is the sense of unity that comes only from experience – the knowledge of how a good book makes all its details work. *Shakespeare and the Flying Bed* is filled with unnecessary adverbs and adjectives, and even unnecessary episodes. There are ever-so-cute lists of names of characters, most of whom have absolutely nothing to do with the story; they are there only because their names are supposed to be funny. In fact, there are utterly extraneous (but theoretically hilarious) details everywhere; for instance, we hear that papa works "in a factory putting corks in Dr. Itches Medicine bottles." There's no reason we have to know that; but apparently Coté likes to draw pictures of bottles. Finally, there is little that Coté does not allow himself, including the grotesque sentimentality of his theme: "the happiness real sunshine brings . . . the kind that is within every heart." Feh.

Coté's pictures are undeniably competent, surprisingly so for such a young man. But they have a disconcerting tendency toward a Disneyish waxy quality, as if the characters had all just been Simonized. And like Disney, Coté has a fondness for cute round bums, cute round pigs, cute round ladies, and cute round vats of chocolate sauce. (Not surprisingly, the bad people in this book are skinny vegetarians.) In fact, Coté's pictures express a vulgarity without restraint, a childlike indulgence in anarchic fantasizing uncontrolled by the patterning of mature thought. *The Ordinary Bath* artfully depicts anarchic vulgarity; *Shakespeare and the Flying Bed* is anarchic and vulgar.

To attack a young man for being young may seem unnecessarily cruel; the real villain is the publisher who accepted his immature manuscript and exposed him to attack. The looseness and lack of maturity apparent in *Shakespeare and the Flying Bed* show how very difficult it is to make a good picture book; I hope the people at Magook feel as much shame about having published it as they may take pride in *The Ordinary Bath*.

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Two Types of Fantasy

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The Houseless Mouse, Ray Logie. Illus. by Catharine MacKenzie. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 32 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Bee Who Never Slept, Ray Logie. Illus. by Catharine MacKenzie. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 32 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Adventures of Prince Paul, Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. by Jane Wolsak. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 31 pp. $1.69 paper.

The Finding Princess, Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. by Jane Wolsak. Fforbez Enterprises, 1977. 31 pp. $1.69 paper.

"Fantasy" is used today to cover many kinds of stories: stories of imaginary creatures in this world, of imaginary worlds, of humanized animals, of animated toys or objects, of fable and folktale. The four books reviewed here belong to two of these categories: two are animal fantasies, and two are what I shall call, to distinguish them from traditional folktales, "folktale-fantasies." All are picture-storybooks, with a relatively brief text and black-and-white illustrations.

The plots of the two animal fantasies are simple. In *The Houseless Mouse*, Melvyn the mouse goes through many difficulties finding a place to stay, and when he has found one – in a house for people – he is scared away by a near-disaster with a mousetrap. At the end of the story he is still looking for a home, and the narrator appeals to the reader to help him find one. In *The Bee Who Never Slept*, Peter Pollen is a normal bee, except for the fact that he can't sleep through the winter, like other bees. He conceives the great idea of spending the winter selling used beeswax, but he cannot get customers. So he decides to give the wax away, "And that is how you get wax in your ears. Peter Pollen, who never sleeps, put it in."

These simple plots are given life by the author's language. He can use it