Some Choices Not Taken

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The Grass Beyond the Door, Katherine McVicar. Illus. by Pat Marriott. Methuen, 1978. 128 pp. $7.95 cloth.

The Grass Beyond the Door is an interesting failure: interesting in what it attempts, but a failure ultimately in what it achieves. This vaguely Victorian fantasy introduces the reader to Miranda, a curious, bright little girl, and her cat Sinbad, a creature who has that delightful ability to talk, to reason, to lead his friend into adventure, and mysteriously to know what is likely to happen beyond the next footstep. The book is a series of adventures experienced by Miranda and commented upon by Sinbad.

These adventures are the central interest of the book. They are varied and fun. They take the reader into a shaggy garden to have tea with the resident witch, or to meet Uncle Lewis, a sea adventurer who always has tales and gifts to share, or to play with a strange boy who never talks but seems to possess a warm and special gift of communication.

But these adventures are also the book's failure, for they are not allowed to accord with the nature of fantasy. Fantasy has always made special demands on its readers; it tells of things that cannot really happen and of people who do not really exist. Yet within the framework of that fantasy the reader has to be convinced of a self-contained logic. The experience created for the reader therefore is true because it accords with the laws of that newly created world. McVicar sets up her framework by convincing the reader that Sinbad can talk, has a past history, and can enlighten Miranda about things in the future. The reader's belief in the reality of the fantasy world has to have sufficient material on which to build, but McVicar's logic does not convince because it never acquires enough substance. There are simply too many threads and motifs, not enough laws and boundaries, and the reader loses his sense of control.

The many, many episodes Miranda and Sinbad are involved in, while promising to be entertaining, come to little. They all have potential but they are so brief, so fleeting, and ultimately so isolated that except for the reappearance of the central character they might be unrelated short stories. One moves into the fantasy world and out of it at a rate of one adventurous chapter every two or three pages. This revolving-door effect never allows the reader to become comfortable with either the fantasy world or the real

one. The pace is exhausting and finally dissatisfying.

Because one must keep up with the new adventures another problem arises. McVicar is faced with two choices in this fantasy: *some* of the very interesting ideas that appear in embryonic form could be developed into a more satisfying length allowing for the reader's involvement in the enlarged situation, or Miranda might be used as a character who gains depth, insight, and growth through the varied characters she meets and through the ramifications of the human events. But neither alternative is chosen. The emotional depth of the characters is never allowed to develop before another brief and unrelated adventure begins. Nor is the child's interest in inward aspects of life and her fascination with human personality allowed to expand.

In one episode, Miranda is invited up on the rooftop by Sinbad. Together they peer down and eventually climb into the chimney. The prose passage is powerful in its sense of anticipation and its imagery. The smoke twists and leaps, forming itself into strange grey characters who run, flailing and writhing, silently toward Sinbad and Miranda. They go past, up, and out of the chimney. "They are the souls of trees that have been burned," says Sinbad. "They are not harmful but need freedom." And with that an intriguing idea is dropped; we go on to yet another adventure in the same chapter. This time Miranda finds a bottle on a chimney niche. It has swirling black smoke in it and a label on it. The label is misread, Miranda opens the bottle, and the Shadowman escapes. He is evil, he is destructive, but we learn little more about him. By the time he reappears, we will have lost interest in him.

McVicar's prose style, on the other hand, is one of the strengths of the book. Some passages are extraordinarily evocative of mood as well as of scenery: "Yet always flung over her days like a scarf were the heat and the blue fringe of water and white scroll of sand." For any reader, that borders on poetry.

Dialogue is not extensive; instead the reader is treated to elaboration through narrative passages that display McVicar's enjoyment and feel for the English language. What dialogue is included is acceptable and believable. The characters speak, often with a complexity of expression that is literate and yet entertaining for a young reader.

Illustrations for the text are done by Pat Marriott. These are skillful pen and ink drawings that are vital and remind one very much of Edward Ardizzone's. They complement the text through their frequency and in their elaboration of each adventure as it happens, a combination also necessary for the young reader.

But who is the young reader? McVicar has not really decided. For a young child the pace, the changing events, the hopping from one episode to the next may be what sustains his interest, yet this is not the same reader who can handle words such as " malicious," "desolate," "sequins," and

"erratically." It is not the same reader who might recognize the allusions to Alice or to Bob Cratchit, allusions that have no flesh on them to suggest their significance to a reader who does not know their source. Nor is it the same reader who might recognize vestiges of MacDonald, Lewis or even LeGuin.

The Glass Beyond the Door in balance could be enjoyed, but not treasured, by children who have a taste for fantasy and an appreciation of fine phrasing.

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Mud, Bubbles, and Dark for Early Childhood

CAROL ANNE WIEN

Mud Puddle, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Sami Suomalainen. Annick Press, 1979. 30 pp. $6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920236-47-2

The Dark, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Sami Suomalainen. Annick Press, 1979. 32 pp. $6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929236-09-X

Up in Bubbles, Barbara Salsberg. Annick Press, 1979. 48 pp. $6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929236-37-5

Annick Press offers three new Canadian titles for young children. Munsch's *Mud Puddle* and *The Dark* grew out of storytelling sessions with pre-school children, and Salsberg's *Up in Bubbles* grew out of a childhood fantasy later developed into mime routine. All three stories, thus, had long histories before they were published as books. Salsberg's story works as a series of visual images: its strength lies in the tautness and precision of the illustrations which convey the story with the clarity of mime. However, this