On Reviewing Picture Books

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Six Darn Cows, Margaret Laurence. Illus. by Ann Blades. James Lorimer & Company, 1979. 32 pp. $6.95, laminated boards. ISBN 0-88862-247-3.

A Salmon for Simon, Betty Waterton. Illus. by Ann Blades. Douglas & McIntyre, 1978. 28 pp. $7.95, laminated boards. ISBN 0-88894-168-4.

In a country where books for children are sometimes demeaned by condescending references to "Kiddies' Lit," it is reassuring to find that Canadian authors with international reputations as writers of adult fiction are also writing children's books. Mordecai Richler, Marian Engel, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence evidently agree with C.S. Lewis's contention that a children's story may be the best art-form for something you have to say.[1] In contrast to these authors, our best known illustrators – Elizabeth Cleaver, Laszlo Gal, Frank Newfeld and Ann Blades, for example – are closely identified with books for children.

The fact that the two books under review here were illustrated by the same artist, Ann Blades, provides an opportunity to gain insight into her style and to assess her response to texts that she has not written herself.[2] A comparative review also illuminates some facts about picture-story books.

Reviewers of illustrated children's books often emphasize that the text and the visual material should complement each other. Unfortunately, all reviews tend to analyse the structure of the story, to consider the development of its theme, or to criticize the style of the author, while treating the illustrations with a lack of informed criticism. When vague adjectives such as "competent," "artful," and "imaginative" are used to describe the illustrations, along with a scholarly review of the text, the criticism of pictorial elements plays second fiddle to the literary analysis. By combining forces, the present reviewers – a literary critic and an art historian – hope to avoid that particular shortcoming, and to give equal consideration to the text and the visual material in *Six Darn Cows* and *A Salmon for Simon*.

Underlying this notion of the relationship between text and illustration is an important aspect of human perception: the written story activates a different type of thinking from that of the correlating visual illustrations. Verbal thinking and visual thinking should work together when a child

reads an illustrated book. It follows that reviewers should be as critical of the formal strength and the content of the illustrations as they are of the written narrative.

Six Darn Cows is a curiously old-fashioned book. With its pattern of misdemeanour (which the Victorians would have called "sin"), atonement, and reconciliation, it is moral in a nineteenth century way[3] and it recreates an experience of rural life for a readership that will be overwhelmingly urban. Jen Bean and Tod Bean are "farm kids". Their parents have tried to instill in them the precept that "on a farm everyone helps." The children's particular job is bringing home the cows, a chore that they find time-consuming and boring. One day they carelessly leave the field gate open. The cows get out and the children with their faithful hound Zip must go into the dark woods to find them. The quest is accomplished with a minimum of suspense and with predictable success. Returning home with the six darn cows, the kids meet their mother who states the moral of the tale, or one of the morals, at any rate:

> "All of us get fed up from time to time . . . I'm proud of you. You went into the woods to find the cows. You did what you thought was best. I think you are brave kids."

But do the author and artist really create the sense of courageous adventure that this maternal praise implies? In myth and folklore, entering the forest is a conventional way of demonstrating heroic attributes. In "Hansel and Gretel," for example, the fearful associations of the forest are established by the opening conversation between wife and husband:

> "Early to-morrow morning we'll take the children out into the thickest part of the wood . . . They won't be able to find their way home, and we shall be rid of them."
> "No, wife," said her husband, "that I won't do; how could I find it in my heart to leave my children alone in the wood? The wild beasts would come soon and tear them to pieces."[4]

We would expect that Margaret Laurence, whose novels convey such a strong sense of locale, and Ann Blades, whose *Mary of Mile 18* was marked by a vivid revelation of northern landscape, would have been able to do rather well in the spine-tingling line. But neither represents the archetype adequately. It is true there is a passing reference to a wolf, but that is quickly counterbalanced by "Then they heard soft wings and a bird call. Thank goodness! It was only an owl that lived in the woods." The illustrations shows a small orange bird perched like a stuffed toy on a high branch. The trees in the Dark Woods are tall and their bleak colour evokes a haunting mood but this feature is overpowered by the boring manner in which they are painted. Furthermore, the darkness is not convincingly

created. A clearly lit foreground is combined with a dark sky in the background, while the children's clothes are as bright as they would be in daylight (see figure 1). There is inconsistency, too, between the artist's leafless trees and shrubs and the author's concluding remark: "And the next day it was still summer."

Some of the book's characteristics may be explained by the fact that *Six Darn Cows* is part of the Kids of Canada Series. Aiming, perhaps, at "comprehensive coverage," it comes close to being a unisex book. Nothing in the text distinguishes Jen and Tod – not even the assignment of guilt for leaving the gate open. They speak the same way; they feel the same way –

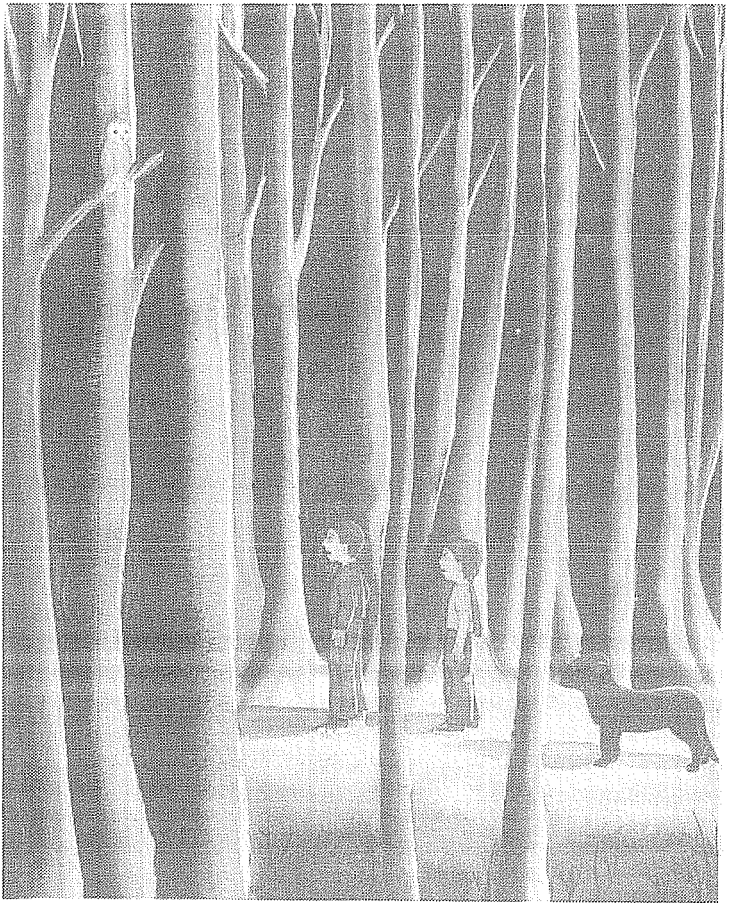

Figure 1.

"Me too"; and they are depicted visually with "twin" expressions and "mirror-image" poses.

The most striking aspect of *Six Darn Cows* is the liveliness of the dialogue. The sound of the human voice is skilfully conveyed by the abbreviated sentences, the capitalisation of emphatic words and by such colloquialisms as "darn," "kids", "rats!" and "wow!" And the virtues of responsibility, hard work, family loyalty, co-operation, asceticism and gratitude are demonstrated in a way that small children can understand. To quote Mrs. Bean again: " We may not have much money . . . but we have two good kids. And we have the land and the river and the cows." Ruskin would have approved.

Betty Waterton's *A Salmon for Simon* is also a story that teaches a lesson though in this case the theme is ecological as well as moral. Simon lives on an island near the west coast of Canada. His greatest desire is to catch a salmon with the fishing rod that his father has given him. But even though it is September, when the salmon are running, he is unsuccessful until an eagle drops a fish into a clam hole that the boy has dug. But "Sukai" is so beautiful that Simon has no wish to kill it. Rather he determines to find a way of returning the salmon to the sea. His plan requires long, hard work. His hands become blistered and his feet grow cold. But he is "warm inside. And happy."

Waterton is an engagingly subtle writer. We may deduce – we are not told directly – that Simon is an Indian child and that he lives in a house where there is no electricity and where wood is used for cooking and heating. But there is no sense of deprivation. Simon's world is beautiful and exciting and secure. The sense of setting is powerfully conveyed by the use of verbal images that appeal to all the senses – the bang, bang, pop of clam shells dropped on the rocks by hungry gulls, the sensation of the salmon pushing its nose against the gravelly sides of the clam hole, the flat white sand dollars and pink sea anemones, the FLAP, FLAP, FLAP of the eagle's wings, and the "gleam" of the freed fish as it leaps into the air and dives into the "deep secret places of the sea."

Ann Blades' illustrations complement this text so superbly that she was awarded the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Illustrators' Award for the best illustrated book published in Canada in 1978. She causes the observer's viewpoint to alternate in an imaginative way, so that the anxieties or joys of the boy are expressed in the varied space relationships used in the paintings: the eagle carrying the salmon flies high up – far away from Simon who is seen as a tiny speck on the shore. The boy's diminished size makes one perceive the great distance between the eagle and Simon. At the same time, the close-up of the bird evokes a sense of excitement by the proximity to the onlooker of this dangerous creature (see figure 2).

Figure 2.

In contrast to this use of space is the space relationship found in the illustration of the salmon swimming in the clam hole. Blades composes the scene as if the boy were seeing his own toes while looking down at the beautiful salmon. The observer identifies with Simon in perceiving this fish.

With regard to form, the draughtmanship in *A Salmon for Simon* is more successful than that in *Six Darn Cows*. The lonely figure of Simon on the title page, for instance, captures the gestalt of the boy in a far more convincing manner than is achieved by the quite formless cows and dog on the cover of *Six Darn Cows* (see figure 3). On both covers Blades uses simple forms, typical of her style, but the dark and clearly contoured boots

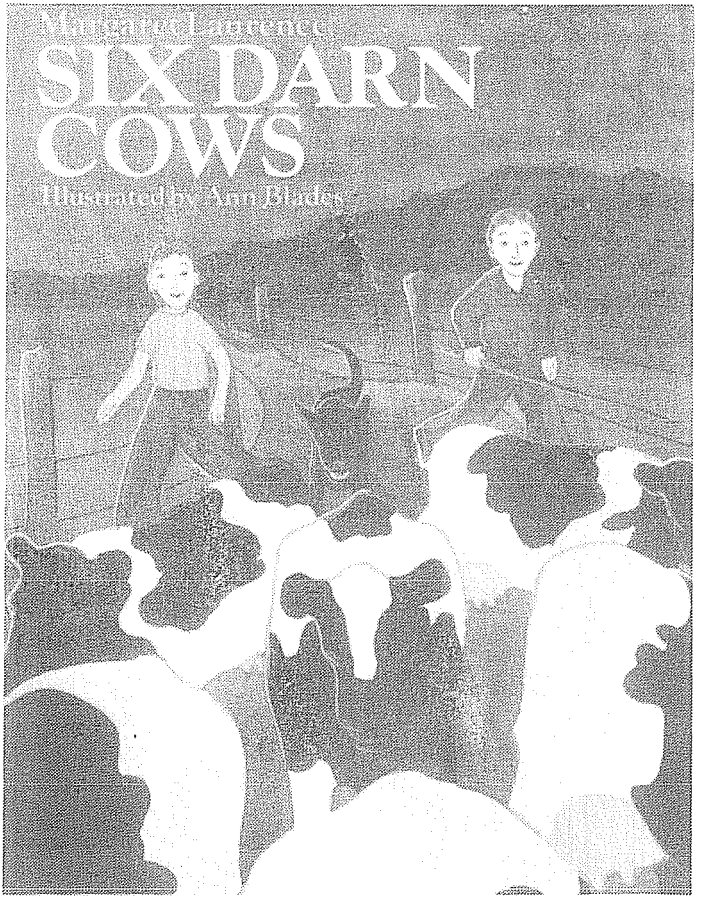

Figure 3.

of Simon remain in their stylization a strong form (see figure 4), while the equally black shape of the dog in the center of the Laurence book cover is formless in spite of being patched up with a weakly drawn contour which tries to assist us in reading this shape as "a dog." In several instances the proportions of the animals in *Six Darn Cows* are disturbingly awkward; this is not the case in the illustrations for *A Salmon for Simon*.

At the same time, the children in the Laurence book lack variation in their movement and their stereotyped poses are repetitive compared with Simon's. Another point of comparison, the representation of night, is also

expressed more sensitively in the Waterton book where the consistent use o muted tones in the illustration of Simon's return to the lamp-lit home makes us "feel" the darkness. In short, the sensitive realism of the text ii conveying both the exterior and interior world of the child, together witl the formal strength of the illustrations, produces an impression of ricl human experience that is strangely absent from *Six Darn Cows*.

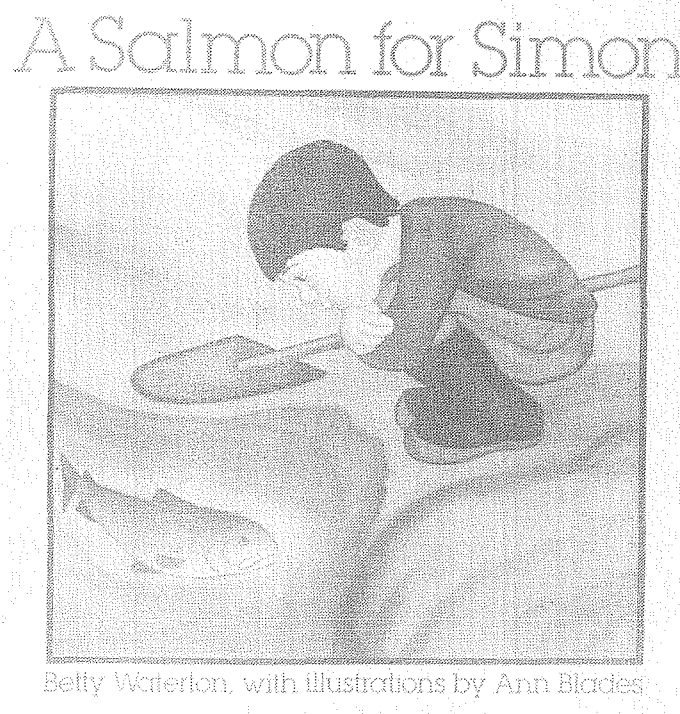

Figure 4.

NOTES

[1]C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," *Only Connect*, ed. Sheila Egoff, G.L. Stubbs, L.F. Ashley (Toronto, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 208.

[2]Compare *A Boy of Tache* (Montreal: Tundra, 1973); *Mary of Mile 18* (Montreal: Tundra 1971) and *The Cottage at Crescent Beach* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

[3]Compare selections in Leonard de Vries' *Little Wide-Awake, an Anthology of Victorian Children's Books and Periodicals* (London: Arthur Barker, 1967).

[4]Andrew Lang, ed. *The Blue Fairy Book* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965 [1889]) p. 251.

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Rousseau for Young Readers

JAMES GELLERT

Anna's Pet, Margaret Atwood and Joyce Barkhouse. Illus. by Ann Blades. James Lorimer & Company, 1980. 32 pp. $6.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88862-249-x-bd.

Two external details relevant to the production of *Anna's Pet* might at first glance cause some disquietude to those familiar with books intended for young children. First, as a series book, it is presumably susceptible to the limitations common to books written following a prescriptive formula. Secondly, the sensitive partnership between writer and illustrator, so delicate in a picture book for beginning readers, is complicated by the involvement of a third collaborator in the venture. Happily, in the latest title in the "Kids of Canada Series," *Anna's Pet*, which is co-authored by