What's *Really* in a Name?

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My Name is not Odessa Yarker, Marian Engel. Illus. by Laszlo Gal. Kids Can Press, 1977. Unpaged. $6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-919964-70-2.

The Leaves of Louise, Matt Cohen. Illus. by Rikki. McClelland and Stewart, 1978. 30 pp. $7.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-2190-9.

These two books make an intriguing combination. Readers will not only enjoy their brevity (each can be read aloud comfortably at one sitting), but may also find it instructive to read them back to back and compare the reactions of their listeners. Both stories present us with children who get called by names other than their own, though for different reasons and with different results. How to cope with false labels provides an issue with which the child listener/reader can readily identify. There is, moreover, a skilfully developed tension between reality and fantasy in both books which is bound to draw children into the situation and sustain interest.

My Name is not Odessa Yarker by Marian Engel tells the story of Geraldine Shingle's attempt to rid herself of the bogus identity foisted on her by a pesky younger brother named Rufus. Irritated by her reluctance to share her 752 jelly beans, Rufus announces on the school public address system that from now on he will be called José, and his sister, Odessa Yarker. Fury cannot alter this edict, for everyone gleefully cooperates in calling her Odessa, a name which her brother has borrowed from a fat and hateful babysitter. But worse, Geraldine begins to see the name everywhere: on leaves, bricks, jam jars, medicine bottles, on a banner in the sky, even on television. She can't stand it. Finally, after a day of moping about outside of school, she climbs a statue in Queen's Park, Toronto, and cries out her defiance: "My name is not Odessa Yarker!" It works. "Squirrels stopped chattering. Birds stopped singing. All traffic in the circle stopped." She goes home, writes a statement declaring her own identity, gets it notarized at her father's office, and hands it to her brother. The contrite Rufus uses the PA system to reinstate Odessa as Geraldine, but adds that Geraldine will now bring her 752 jellybeans to school. Geraldine is free at the cost of her hoard.

In Matt Cohen's *The Leaves of Louise*, a boy called Albert D. Liar has a room in the attic. There Louise, a potted plant with magical powers, hangs from the ceiling. Albert makes up daft stories about Louise to the irritation of his parents and teachers and the amusement of his classmates. But Louise is indeed capable of marvellous feats of vegetable locomotion (she is a kind of benign triffid), and she possesses a voice which sings an unearthly,

bubbly song. In a dream Albert envisions another plant coming to the window and inviting Louise to a far-off jungle world. He wakes to find the dream happening. Louise tucks up her roots and floats into space with her boyfriend. When Albert tells this in school everyone laughs. But Louise appears, singing her song, and sending her long leaves through the classroom while everyone watches and listens. Albert returns home, buries Louise's empty pot, and dreams henceforth of her song. Only now can he revert to his real name, Albert Smith.

Engel sets her tale in a recognizable locale, downtown Toronto (Madison/Lowther area above Bloor) and Geraldine proclaims her real identity atop a familiar structure in Queen's Park. Her illustrator, Laszlo Gal, enforces realism with his tidy pencil drawings of old Toronto houses and the Provincial Parliament buildings. But everything in this comfortable world gets imprinted with the word "Odessa", at least in Geraldine's mind, and a strange, scary pressure builds up in the text which is not matched by Gal's drawings, since he doesn't fill the page with Odessas. (Incidentally, both "Odessa" and "Yarker" are the names of Ontario towns familiar to anyone who travels Highway 401 east of Toronto.) The break comes in the story with Geraldine's vision of the Everlasting Yea, a stopping of the universe which seems to be malevolently organized against her.

Cohen's scene is much more "unplaced" from the beginning: a tall house on a hill, Albert's attic room, Louise rising out of it to the stars. Rikki's drawings, printed in a rose-coloured ink, not only reinforce the text, they elaborate a space beyond it. Curious animal and vegetable shapes combine surrealistically; there are eyes staring from every second page. I find these pictures a bit chilly and disturbing, and children might too. Perhaps they are too sophisticated for a child's overt reaction. Whatever effect they are having will probably operate on a subrational level and will certainly defy parental explanation.

Engel's story presents a problem, an injustice which must be corrected by strong action. Geraldine generates enough will power and anger to break the "Odessa" spell, first emotionally by hollering atop the statue of a mounted king then pragmatically by getting a legal statement of identity from her lawyer-father. The book, then, dramatizes the value of forceful declarations of independence backed by law, in the often manipulated lives of girls and women. But Engel, sensibly, doesn't insist on a mere male-female dichotomy; her lesson is of personhood, good for all sexes. Gal's drawings, incidentally, depict both boys and girls in the current asexual garb and haircut which make them nearly indistinguishable. Although one may have reservations about the ease with which Rufus and Geraldine get access to PA systems and notarized statements – the means of power and exorcism seem all too easily available to these middle-class kids – the story is well-shaped and clearly told.

Unlike Geraldine, Albert does not appear to suffer from his label as "Liar". On the contrary, he accepts his state and the special relationship with Louise with fine aplomb. Anything can happen in this world – teachers get eaten by bears, he can swallow a donkey – and even if his parents do get angry he's still got Louise who "with her leaves wrapped close . . . was like a jungle – fierce and full of strange sounds and shadows." Like any fabulator, Albert is not bothered by the interpenetration of the mundane and extraordinary, which is, I take it, Cohen's main point in the story. Even though Albert stops "lying" when he buries Louise's clay pot, he still dreams and Louise still visits him in the night, her song filling his head, her leaves filling his attic room. I shall here hesitate to openly declare this potted plant pot, even though Rikki's leaves are vaguely familiar. That Louise is a creative force, both disturbing and enriching, however, is perfectly clear, and children should get this part of the message. What is left a bit murky, as it must be, is where the realm of everyday truth and that of inner fantastical truth separate out; children will either simplify it for themselves, or perhaps float with it, helped by Rikki's drawings. Cohen's book might prompt further fantasizing, especially in children who have plants. Engel's book should provoke questions, suggest some answers, perhaps help in a minor personal resolution. Read together, or on successive nights, the books could get children talking and thinking about their own situations.

Adult readers may find these stories instructive and appropriate offshoots of the authors' concerns in their mature fiction. Marian Engel is most famous for her novel *Bear*, which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1976. She is also author of the novels *Clouds of Glory* and *The Honeyman Festival* as well as of short stories and children's fiction. Geraldine's achievement of speaking in her own voice as a declaration of freedom echoes Lou's moment of discovery in *Bear*, when she runs across Trelawney's book on Byron and Shelley and is delighted to share the writer's experience of self-hood. Geraldine's release like Lou's is triggered by a verbal device. Matt Cohen has been publishing nearly a book a year since the late sixties, most recently *The Wooden Hunters, The Colours of War* and *Night Flights*. Albert's special sensory awareness of Louise's tremulous vegetable life may recall the visceral and neural energy of *The Wooden Hunters*. Cohen's facility with the bizarre goes back at least as far as *Too Bad Galahad*. I think *Leaves of Louise* could have used some of the comic adroitness manifest in this latter book, a series of absurdist retakes on the Galahad story.

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