

NOTES

¹Jon Pearce, "Desire and Death: Susan Musgrave," *Malahat Review*, no. 53 (Jan. 1980), p. 14.

²See Murray J. Evans, "Bright Parable of Pernilla," *Canadian Children's Literature*, 18/19 (1980): 117-120.

Murray J. Evans has written articles on Malory's Morte Darthur and reviews on children's literature. He teaches medieval literature, composition, and children's literature and fantasy at the University of Victoria.

A Rainbow for Emma

JEAN LITTLE

there's a rainbow in my closet, Patti Stren. Illus. by Patti Stren. Harper & Row, 1979. 136 pp. \$11.75 hardback. ISBN 0-06-026082-3.

Patti Stren's first novel *there's a rainbow in my closet* presents us with an engaging heroine, creative and lively, shy and noisy, strong-minded yet vulnerable, never sweet yet wholly endearing. The book resembles its main character in more ways than one.

It too, is occasionally awkward and unsure, now and then exasperating, and yet, in spite of these momentary lapses, entertaining, sensitive and memorable. There is also a refreshing intimacy and honesty in the way Patti Stren writes of childhood. Here is a new voice and a welcome one.

Emma Goldberg is an only child whose father, a clockmaker, understands and appreciates her. Her mother, the publicity manager for a ballet company, loves her but is busy and fails to take Emma's passion for drawing and painting seriously. When Emma learns that her mother is going to leave her to go to Europe for a couple of months and that her grandmother, a stranger to Emma, is coming to look after her, Emma is outraged. Hurt that her mother can actually

be excited about a trip that takes her away from herself, she is convinced that she will hate Gramma.

She asks her friend Edgar what grandmothers are like and even though Edgar does his best to reassure her by saying "They're quite nice. Not bad people to have around the house. Honest." she remains positive that she and Gramma will be not merely incompatible but enemies. As she prophesies in her diary: "I'm never, never going to like my grandmother. NEVER!"

When she arrives, however, Gramma is soon discovered to be a kindred spirit and, most unexpectedly, a person who recognizes and respects her granddaughter's intense love of and gift for drawing and painting. From then on, the two of them form a team, each enriching the other's life enormously. They talk at length, listen to music, and join in adventures. Gramma's love for and pride in her gives Emma the courage to risk revealing her own personal private self to her class when it is her turn to make a speech. Gramma even suggests, without pushing, that Mother might be allowed a chance to redeem herself by being shown Emma's precious painting of the sky as it changes from first dusk to starry dark. Mom once tacked up a ballet schedule over a painting Emma had given her. In light of that, one hopes that Gramma will have time to prepare Mrs. Goldberg for the importance of this private exhibition before Emma confronts her with it. One also feels that Mom is not necessarily devoid of sensitivity because of this one regrettable incident. Emma after all does produce an endless stream of artwork. Even Van Gogh's brother Theo might have been drawn to admit that, while it is a privilege to be the close relative of a genius, it is far from easy.

The adults in this novel, while definitely alive, are not wholly convincing. For two people who appear to understand each other, Emma's parents seem to have communicated no more than superficially about their daughter. Gramma is practically perfect. It is true that she only has to keep up her absorption with Emma after school hours and for the duration of a visit. Nevertheless she lives in Florida because of her arthritis and it must be severe to have kept her living that far from Emma's family. Surely fatigue and pain would shorten her temper now and then and limit her enthusiasm. She sets an implausibly high standard for grandmothers called in to cope with children during family crises. True as this may be, the reader is not concerned about it for this is Emma's story, not Gramma's, and Emma is entirely real.

Particularly interesting and moving is the way Patti Stren lets us experience, through Emma, the excitement and total involvement of

the artist during the act of creating. This is described beautifully and with loving detail. To take time to do this in a child's book shows courage and skill for the author cannot hold the reader captive with lively dialogue or fast-paced action. Creating is a solitary business and cannot be hurried or easily dramatized. Patti Stren has caught the essence of this absorbed and concentrated time and has shown the tremendous internal suspense within the artist. Will the creation come close to the dream? Emma's does, but it is also made clear that this comes about as the result of authentic vision, brooding, trying and failing and trying again until it is right at last. Emma's tools of the trade are described with fond attention and will enthrall children who hunger for specificity. Just as dozens of children have kept notebooks after reading *Harriet the Spy*, so many will now experiment with painting like Emma.

Adults, be they parents, teachers, grammas, or interested bystanders, should get some help with how to encourage and enjoy children like Emma (and most children are like Emma *some* of the time.) Gramma's Surprise Test is inspired. So is her way of helping Emma see Ms. Pickett's point of view. While Emma sees Gramma's sadness as she remembers her home and family lost to her in the Russian Revolution and asks her about it, Gramma shares her sorrow with the child honestly. She does not dwell on this grief, burdening Emma with too great a pain for her to bear, but neither does she brush the child's question aside or make light of her own loss. Emma is distressed but she grows as she seeks to comfort her grandmother. The reader will share in this deepening of sympathy.

Patti Stren does not fall into the error of making Emma wise beyond her years and so putting her out of the reader's reach. She considers trying to solace Gramma with an elephant joke.

While this book is insightful and tender, it is also really funny and down-to-earth. It speaks in today's idiom without depending too much on slang that would soon date it.

The illustrations are gentle and puckish. Just as one cannot mistake Maurice Sendak's pictures for those of anyone else, so Patti Stren's are unmistakable. Emma's pictures show Stren's influence but still belong to Emma.

Emma's feelings on the day she makes her speech are not just described vividly but are entered into and lived through by every reader. The fact that Emma is, on the whole, happy and outgoing makes this an especially appealing experience. Here is one of the greatest charms of this book. It demonstrates the contradictions in

each of us and lets children know their moments of panic are not unique to them but are familiar to all of us. And for the rare child with a true creative gift, a compulsion to realize some inner vision, for the child such as Patti Stren herself must have been, *there's a rainbow in my closet* is of intense significance. It says it is exciting and deeply satisfying to make your own thing and that, when you can bear to risk sharing what you have made, somewhere there is an audience eager to see it. What Mom may see as just another picture to tack up and forget, what Ms. Pickett may criticize and mark wrong, Gramma will recognize as important. Just as Emma keeps painting in spite of her mother and Ms. Pickett, others will be encouraged to have faith in themselves, knowing that someday a gramma may come.

A funny book, a tender, wistful story, a tough, lively, endearing novel full of shifts in tone and mood, full of colour – especially purple. A book as surprising and delightful as a rainbow in your closet.

Jean Little is one of Canada's best known writers for children. Her books are internationally known and are translated into many languages.

C'est la foire chez Noé!

MARY GRAHAM

Sans fin la Fête, texte et illustrations par Etienne Delessert. Fides, 1980. Jean-Pierre Delarge, editeur. 30 pp. ISBN. 2-7621-1011-4.

Sans fin la Fête est un livre charmant pour enfants du premier cycle de l'école élémentaire. Il raconte une version moderne et humoristique de l'histoire de l'arche de Noé qui saura éveiller la curiosité des petits. Le récit commence par une invitation à tous les animaux de venir assister au lancement de l'arche. Tout le monde se précipite à la plage, enthousiasmé par cet événement insolite. Il s'ensuit une courte description de la fête à bord l'arche où toute espèce s'amuse follement à longueur de journée.

Un petit inconvénient survient lors du concours de saut en hauteur. La puce saute tellement haut qu'elle touche l'oeil de Monsieur le Soleil