

Small Books – Big Value

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Henry Finds a Home, Wendy St. Pierre. Illus. by Barbara Eidlitz. Annick Press, 1982. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-05-7.

Jonathan Cleaned Up – Then He Heard a Sound or Blackberry Subway Jam, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1981. Unpaginated. \$.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-21-9.

The Mole and the Cricket, Janosch. Illus. by Janosch. Annick Press, 1982. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-27-8.

Mud Puddle, Robert Munsch. Illus. Sami Suomalainen. Annick Press, 1981. Unpaginated. \$.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-23-5.

The Paper Bag Princess, Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1981. Unpaginated. \$.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-25-1.

The Special Birthday Book, Blair Dawson. Illus. Blair Dawson. Annick Press, 1982. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-03-0.

Annick Press proves the adage that “good things come in small packages” with their tiny paperback Annikins, measuring 9cm by 9cm (or app. 3 1/2 by 3 1/2 inches). Two successful releases of three titles each have ensured a public eager for more.

The earliest Annikins author, Robert Munsch, is first and foremost a storyteller. To hear him recount one of his original tales is a rare treat, for he throws himself into his delivery with extraordinary vigour. Fortunately, he is as fascinating in print as in person. Three of his most popular stories are now available not only in full-size volumes, but as very attractive Annikins.

Earliest in original publication date, *Mud Puddle* introduces Jule Ann, a resourceful young woman of romper-room age who is beset by one of childhood’s bugbears: dirt. A menacing mud puddle lies in wait for Jule Ann; literally, for this puddle lurks in a tree, on a rooftop, and behind the dog house, with intent to jump all over her, filling eyes, nose and mouth with mud. Any child knows the weapon with which to fight dirt, and Jule Ann enlists the aid of “smelly orange soap” to deal the mud puddle a crushing blow. (Munsch has since remarked that he is amazed he didn’t realize in time that it should, of

course, have been “smelly YELLOW soap”.) This slight, funny story is gloriously satisfactory in that Jule Ann triumphs through her own ingenuity. She suffers the ritual three misfortunes, the telling of which becomes a kind of refrain dealing with baths, clean clothes, and fresh starts; and the final episode is perfectly definitive. Good (Jule Ann plus soap) triumphs over Evil (dirt), and the young reader is able to gloat with a pleasure untinged by regret for a too-sympathetic villain. It is unfortunate that Jule Ann has been drawn in several extremely unattractive close-ups, though pleasingly enough in perspective.

Munsch’s work is more appropriately illustrated in *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Jonathan Cleaned Up – Then He Heard A Sound*, both with Michael Martchenko. *Princess* is a tale of castles, dragons, and the liberated Princess Elizabeth. When disaster strikes, and she is left destitute, without a castle or a dress to her name, this sturdy young woman, jauntily clad in a paper bag, outsmarts the dragon who has caused the trouble, frees her captive fiancé Prince Ronald, and finding him not-so-charming, goes off to do whatever liberated princesses do. *Princess* has drawn fire for being sexist in its treatment of ungallant Prince Ronald. It seems a contradiction in terms to describe so wildly original a conception as stereotypical, and that, after all, is what sexism is; the perpetuation of stereotypical thinking. Nobody ever said that all girls, boys, or for that matter dragons or newts, must be portrayed as *admirable*.

Jonathan is the tale of a phantom Toronto subway station that suddenly appears in a nice tidy living room, with disastrous effects. Young Jonathan is equal to the situation: a judicious bribe of blackberry jam soon has the offending station removed, and in the last panel the disorderly subway crowd is just beginning to spill into the mayor’s office. This cheerfully unlikely story, like the other Munsch tales (it is a great temptation to call them Munschkins) are the stuff of which lasting childhood favourites are made.

The second batch of tiny titles consists of three gossamer-light, pleasant little picture books. *Henry Finds A Home* introduces a baby turtle who has not realized his own potential, and is searching for a home in some very unlikely places, such as a beehive or a bear’s cave. At last King Turtle comes to his rescue, and Henry discovers that his home has been there waiting for him, on his back, all the while he has been searching. Though this *deus ex machina* solution to the problem is less satisfactory than the independent problem-solving of Munsch’s little people, it is an up-beat story, glowingly illustrated.

The Special Birthday Book has but a few lines of text: it merely suggests various fantastic ways a birthday might be celebrated, such as

exploring a haunted house with a brave friend, or flying away in a balloon. This flight into fancy ends on a more attainable plateau of "specialness" by suggesting that the reader have a Happy Birthday! This charming title is enhanced by Drawson's inimitable illustrations featuring multi-cultural little birthday celebrants.

The Mole And The Cricket is an off-beat rendition of the old cautionary fable: but *this* time, the cricket fiddles the summer away, and then has a perfectly super winter with her good friend Mole. The moral of the story has been somewhat obscured, and the final illustration of an unlikely duo cosily ensconced for a long winter's nap is more than a little ambiguous. Writers with a tongue-in-cheek style, however amusing, should save this kind of humour for adult readers. Those who write for very young children must keep their audience and its needs firmly in focus, at whatever cost to their own jeu d'esprit. . . .

It is not usual to remark upon price as a matter of concern in relation to childrens' literature of quality: however, in the case of the Annikins miniatures, their price must be mentioned. In an era of alarming cost increases, even Annikins have suffered, making a leap from \$.95 to \$.99. Beleaguered parents and friends of children must now rely on library circulation as never before, since the cost of childrens' titles have increased to the point where a purchase must be the subject of careful deliberation. While libraries are to be treasured, it is, nevertheless, important that every child have as well books of his or her very own, *not* borrowed; that the child should learn to care for and maintain this first collection and add to it, perhaps one day to pass on well-loved volumes to his or her own children.

It is unlikely that Annikins will survive long enough to become heirlooms, but they make a charming seedling library at a price within easy reach. They are *real books*, not the chain-store imitation that so often deceive the unwary. They can be read and re-read with pleasure. One can only hope that this attractive new format will be fruitful and multiply: book-loving children and their parents will both be the beneficiaries.

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