

Oswald is at her best in the descriptions of the two young Indians, Domagaya and Tiagnoagny, who accompanied Cartier back to France. Luc's observations provide a glimpse of the Indians' reactions when first confronted by the explorers. These detailed descriptions give a sense that Cartier's voyages to the great unknown were like Armstrong's "giant step for mankind". However, if the young reader wishes to know how it would have felt to have been there "in the afternoon of May 19 [when] anchors were weighed" he will not find out in *Young Explorer from Brittany*.

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The Mysterious East

*JETSKE SYBESMA-IRONSIDE and
MURIEL WHITAKER*

At Grandmother's House, John Lim. Tundra Books, 1977. 32 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-089-9.

Merchants of the Mysterious East, John Lim. Tundra Books, 1981. 32 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-130-5.

Born in Singapore and educated in the United States, John Lim is a Chinese artist who now lives in Toronto. His dual perspective — that of an Easterner living in the West — is apparent in two children's books for which he has provided both text and illustration. The adventures of the young Johnnie, though verbally prosaic, are depicted in an exotic manner. Stylization of form, use of flat colour, and slightly unusual treatment of pictorial space result in a refreshing illustrative style.

The texts are not so much stories as an adult's recollection of childhood acquaintances and family members who "made his boyhood such a beautiful and exciting time." *At Grandmother's House* follows

a *Fun With Dick and Jane* format, showing the family group even including a dog and cat. Despite the exoticism of the setting — a village near Singapore — Canadian children can readily identify with Johnnie because the experience of leaving the city on weekends to visit grandmother’s farm is a familiar one. Sucking sugar cane as a snack and eating bird’s nest soup at the New Year’s feast are balanced by more universal childhood experiences, such as sailing wind-up boats in a washtub, fishing in a creek, feeding pigs, and playing hide-and-seek, though the fact that the fish are tropical, the pig food banana trunks and yam leaves, and the hiding place a bamboo grove suggests a foreign ambience.

The underplayed exoticism of the first book is not repeated in *Merchants of the Mysterious East* where experiences common to family life in both East and West are replaced by strange encounters with a gallery of Oriental magicians, fortune tellers, astrologers and peddlars who embody Singapore’s atmosphere of “mystery, magic, and colour.” For the adult reader, *Merchants* is more richly evocative than the first book. The smells of incense, herbs, and freshly ground spices, the rattle of the fortune teller’s bamboo vase, the beautician’s rolling string, the storyteller’s energetic miming, the cooing doves and chattering parrots in the bird shop stimulate all the senses. The child, however, may find the descriptions too episodic, static, and remote, although the illustrations do help to clarify the text (fig. 1):

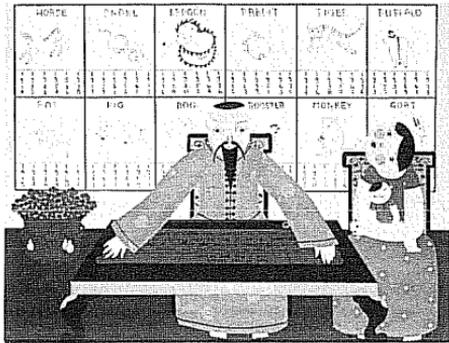


Figure 1.

On the wall behind the Astrologer was a chart covering the twelve-year cycle of zodiac signs. Each year had its own animal sign. Johnnie was born under the sign of the monkey. On other walls were charts of the heavens with planets and stars (p.6).

Perhaps because English is his second language, Lim’s verbal style is sometimes awkwardly elliptical:

Midmorning Grandma came out her front door
 carrying a pot of rice porridge . . .

The excessive use of co-ordinate and paratactic structures results in a monotonous rhythm. But perhaps we should not be too critical of the text since it is the illustrations that provide the chief interest.

Lim's depiction of the objective world is characterised by a reduction of three-dimensional objects to simple two-dimensional shapes. The flatness of these images, whether they indicate man-made objects, flora, fauna, or human beings, is reinforced by his use of flat colours. There are no colour gradations to indicate solidity of form. The stylisation of people results in a stereotyped image of male and female figures. Women are abstracted into a round disc-like head, each head identical to the others, covered by similarly set hair with centre parts; colourful robes cover the body from shoulders to toes. Their expressions are confined to the varied angulations of arms and heads which, in the absence of necks, turn clockwise or counterclockwise in relation to the body. Girls are presented as miniature versions of women. In contrast, men and boys are dressed in distinctly Western clothing. Their gestures have a wider range, for the poses of arms and legs are combined with a tilting of expressionless heads.

The artist's use of identical facial expressions for almost every situation may reflect a convention of Chinese art. Nevertheless, the insistence on full face representation even when the body is seen from the back strikes the Western eye as awkward and idiosyncratic. The "Open-air Opera" in *Merchants* shows this mannerism carried to the point of absurdity, since the members of the audience, who should be facing the stage performers, are actually looking back at the viewer with their identical circular heads drawn upside down (fig. 2). An eight-year-old, when questioned about the logic of this illustration, thought that it was more fun to see faces than backs of heads. Despite this reaction, the unnecessary mannerism reveals an aesthetic limitation, in our view.



Figure 2.

In contrast, Lim's handling of spatial depth and his compositional arrangements in *At Grandmother's House* reflect genuine sensitivity. Perspective is implied through the use of objects receding in depth and through colour strips placed horizontally. Often the artist eliminates a sky-ground division, placing his figures against a flat background as if the plane were seen from a bird's eye view. Similarly, in *Merchants of the Mysterious East*, even though many scenes are placed in an interior setting, locale is defined through colour demarcation between the ground and the back wall.

When one compares the two books, *At Grandmother's House* seems superior. "Arriving at Grandmother's House" shows the river meandering from the lower left of the page to centre right, adjacent to the figures who proceed from the lower right diagonally towards Grandmother (fig. 3). In "A Yam leaf as an umbrella," the centrally placed children with their umbrellas form a pictorial bridge between the two groves at left and right. The restrained treatment of space is complemented by an equally restrained use of colour. Two primary colours are combined

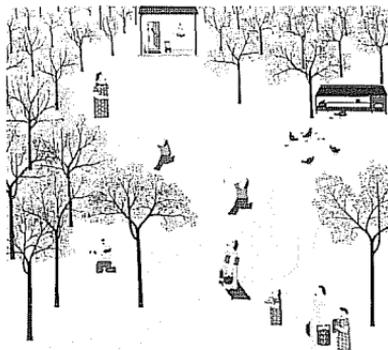


Figure 3.

with tonal variations of these primaries so that, as in "Hide and seek in the bamboo grove" (fig. 4), the result is a simple colour harmony.

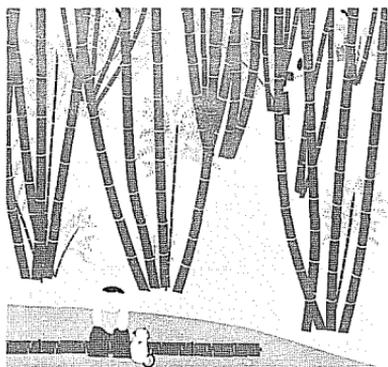


Figure 4.

In *Merchants*, however, an overly vivacious use of colour and a cluttered, random distribution of figures and objects negates the subtle understatement that we associate with Oriental art.

At Grandmother's House received the certificate of excellence from the Art Director's Club in New York. Its recreation of natural beauty, human activities, and warm emotional relationships emphasises the common experiences that unite children of diverse regions and cultures. *Merchants of the Mysterious East* focuses on cultural differences, appealing to a child's curiosity and, it is hoped, encouraging a tolerance of customs that are different from our own.

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Mr. Dressup and Friendly Giant in Print

CAROL ANNE WIEN

The Friendly Giant's Book of Fire Engines, Bob Homme. Illus. by Kim La Fave and Carol Snelling. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981. 24 pp. \$6.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88794-100-1.

The Friendly Giant's Birthday, Bob Homme. Illus. by Carol Snelling Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981. 24 pp. \$6.95 hardcover ISBN 0-88794-099-4.