Re-realizing Mother Goose: An Interview with Dennis Lee on *Jelly Belly*

Cory Bieman Davies & Catherine Ross

DAVIES: This is an interview with Dennis Lee at Huron College on December 8, 1983. We'd like to welcome you here.

LEE: Thank you. This is Dennis Lee lighting his pipe.

DAVIES: We gather that you're on grand tour at the moment, signing copies of *Jelly Belly*. There's been a gap of six years since your last children's book, if you don't count *Ordinary bath* of 1979. Is there any reason for the gap?

LEE: Yes. The *Jelly Belly* manuscript was actually done — I lose track of years — but at least three years ago. It could have come out three years ago with a big push; it certainly could have come out two years ago. There got to be a series of delays that are of no great interest, but they involved whether or not Frank Newfeld was going to be part of things. Then he decided he wasn't, which had nothing to do with *Jelly Belly* — just other aspects of his involvement with Macmillan. Also we were looking for a co-publisher, and that almost firmed up and didn't firm up and almost firmed up and didn't firm up and almost firmed up and didn't firm up and finally it did. And the other publishers were suggesting various possible illustrators. So it was a series of mechanical, organizational things. But the book, oddly, has been finished, in almost its present form, for three and a half years.

DAVIES: How has the reception been?

LEE: I've seen some reviews and critiques, not a whole lot. There've been one or two reviews that were not terribly pleased, and the rest of them have been anywhere from very favourable to raves. You can never tell about the personal responses, because people are usually inhibited from saying, "I can't stand this gunk." But I get the sense from children and adults that it's being very much enjoyed.

DAVIES: And the sales, I take it, have been . . .

LEE: The sales have been disgustingly healthy.

ROSS: Can you give us some figures?

LEE: The first printing was 23,000 and they were sold to bookstores before

the book arrived. The second printing was 15,000 and something like 10,000 of it has gone. [By Christmas, both printings had sold out; because of "short shipment" by the printer, however, the total sale was 36,000.]

DAVIES: How do these figures compare with your earlier books like *Alligator pie?*

LEE: Well, they're significantly higher. The first fall *Alligator pie* sold 15 or 20 thousand . . . . It intrigues me, both in terms of sales figures and in terms of the patterns of the sales. *Nicholas Knock* came out at the same time as *Alligator pie,* fall of 1974. (They were initially a single manuscript, which got divided roughly by age.) The first fall, *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock* were more or less equally popular. I think three copies of *Nicholas Knock* sold for every four of *Alligator pie.* Then fairly quickly the pattern changed. Poetry is still something that you do with *young* people; and you buy Mother Gooses and poetry books for small fry. Poetry seems to get screened out culturally to quite an extent by the time kids get to be eight or nine. So *Nicholas Knock* since then has been selling one copy for every three or four of its younger brother.

DAVIES: Many of the forms in your poetry are recognizable as transformations of traditional forms. Can you talk a bit about the transformations?

LEE: What things do you notice?

DAVIES: I notice certain rhythms from A.A. Milne and from traditional nursery rhymes.

ROSS: Old Mother Hubbard and Elsie Marley and so on.

LEE: There was a book out a little while ago which I disliked intensely. I think it was called *There's a rocket in my pocket* — nursery rhymes for the space age. It took traditional nursery rhymes and updated them, by changing the vocabulary from "ye olde" to "ye moderne." I thought that was quite offensive. It didn't strike me as the right way to go about re-realizing Mother Goose in contemporary form. So that sort of slightly smart-ass updating doesn't appeal to me.

While I was working on *Jelly Belly,* for one reason or other I found myself really intrigued with Mother Goose. And after *Garbage delight,* which had gone a fair way in the other direction — a more Milney direction — of trying to get inside the consciousness and the speaking voice of particular children, I didn't know why, but I began to swing the other way. I got interested in what would happen with a really weathered and anonymous voice, where the narrator is invisible and these little miniature biographies and short stories unfold in a few lines. I'd had a lot of Mother Goose when I was a little tad and I went and steeped myself in the Opies' *Oxford dictionary.*

ROSS: *The Oxford dictionary of nursery rhymes?*

LEE: Yes. I wasn't studying it in a scholarly way at all; I was just picking flowers as I went. I hesitated a bit over keeping "Lazy lousy Liza Briggs" in *Jelly Belly,* because it does put one in mind of Elsie Marley. But the way any of these gestated was not by looking at an existing nursery rhyme and saying, "Ah, I could do something like that." I started just wherever my imagination happened to wander and let things take their own shape. Ones like "Bundle-buggy Boogie" don't have any direct antecedent at all — in fact most of them don't. At times there would be a kind of cross-over spark jumping between the existing thing and what was starting to happen in me. But "Liza Briggs," I'm quite sure, began with the incantatory effect of putting that little run of words together: "Lazy lousy Liza Briggs." If you've got "Briggs," it's fairly obvious that pigs are going to wander in pretty quickly. It was by that kind of intuitive process that things happened.

The only rhyme I consciously modelled on an existing rhyme was the astronaut one, "Neighbour, neighbour, tell me do" ["News of the Day," p. 33]. There's a relatively little known nursery rhyme written sometime about 1730 when the first balloon ascent was made, I think by a Frenchman. It was a popular catch of four or six lines that found its way into the nursery. And there I consciously sat down and said, "Ah, it would be fun to do that with astronauts." That was the only place where the influence was deliberate. I threw a number out because I thought that in the transfer from Mother Goose I had done something inferior to what had been unconsciously influencing me. I didn't enjoy the direct echoes, so I didn't use them.

DAVIES: How long did you immerse yourself in Mother Goose then? Did you make a conscious study for a certain period of time?

LEE: I dipped in and out. The things that nourish your imagination are so catch-as-catch-can and haphazard. I spent about a year on the book, which is very quick for me. The poems were coming through at a very fast rate. I did a lot of revising, but some days I would still find myself having written eight or ten. There were many, many more that never got in.

ROSS: I take it that for every one that you'd keep, there were many that you discarded.

LEE: Yes, many I threw out, and I did a great deal of revision too. One of these innocent little rhymes may have gone through twenty or thirty drafts.

ROSS: Is there one poem that you could talk about in terms of the revisions?

LEE: Without having work-sheets in from of me, it's hard. I can tell you a little about "There was an old lady" [pp. 14-15]. I wish I had the earlier versions here. I worked a lot on that poem and there's a few places I'm still not

happy with. For example, the relation between line two and four in most of the stanzas — "a packet of cheese"/"a basket of bees," "a gallon of juice"/"a galloping goose." I'd handled that differently through one set of drafts. But then I thought it would be fun if the cat had a hearing problem. He hears "packet of cheese" and says, "Ah yes, I know where to get a 'basket of bees,' " and he goes right out and hustles back with them. It became a technical challenge of an excruciating kind, because the first item (in line two) has to be something that the old lady would realistically send the cat out to get. Or semi-realistically, at least. And the thing he comes back with (in line four) has to be something that is absurd but that you might find — it can't just be a string of nonsense syllables. And the two have to sound alike. If you've set yourself this challenge, of trying to make line four essentially a rearrangement of the syllables of line two, that becomes really hard. Then you've got the additional problem that each stanza should top the preceding one slightly and become a little bit more absurd. You can't use your best shot in the first or second stanza. So just in terms of getting through all the hoops it became a real challenge . . . . Anyway, I don't think the ending quite works; there should be some little *click* of inevitability in the last stanza that I haven't been able quite to find. And there seems to be some implication that finally getting a "hot-dog" is connected with its being a "cat" that muffed up the grocery shopping — but what is that supposed to imply? And then, she "sent" for it rather than going out for it; does that imply something? Does she actually have a phone in this shack? . . . There's a little penumbra of vagueness in there that I'm not delighted with. So I may well be revising it five years from now.

ROSS: One thing that I noticed when I picked up *Jelly Belly* is the box in the table of contents labelled "fingers and toes" [for action rhymes]. This will be a big help for librarians and others wanting to include these action rhymes in story hours.

LEE: I hope it will. I was a bit self-conscious about presenting it in this form because it implies a "write-by category" mentality, which is not how I work. The manuscript just sprawled all over the place. For a long time, I had no idea what a good shape to the book would be. But yes, these are poems that ended up pleasing me and staying in, and it's quite possible to group them together and say, "Here they are."

ROSS: But you didn't write them with this category in mind; you realized afterwards that you had written a group of poems that did, in fact, belong in a category.

LEE: It's more that way than it is a matter of sitting down and saying, "OK, this week I'm going to write twelve action rhymes." . . . There are a number of things that are traditionally in Mother Goose collections, some of which I

couldn't do. Some intrigued me but I couldn't get anything working that really pleased me. I didn't get a cumulative rhyme like "The House that Jack Built" for *Jelly Belly*. There's one in *Alligator pie*, "On Tuesdays I Polish my Uncle," which does work and kids enjoy. For *Jelly Belly*, I tried a number and they all seemed dutifully worked up and mechanical and I left them all out. There's another form, the diminishing rhyme — "ten little monkeys, nine little monkeys," that sort of thing. I kicked some of those out at the last minute, actually.

But when I tried my hand at these various action things, some of them worked well enough that they pleased me. One of them that works is the "Five Fat Fleas" poem [p. 26]; I think the model for it must have been "Bingo" — B, I, N, G, (clap). There were a lot of technical hoops to jump through with this poem and often, when that happens, all the zing goes out of it. So much energy has to go into just completing the form you've set up, that there's no real fun in it. But this poem stays alive for me; the playfulness works well there.

ROSS: You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that one of the things that delayed *Jelly Belly* was changing illustrators. How was Juan Wijngaard chosen?

LEE: He was proposed by Blackie, the British co-publisher. There were various suggestions made. I didn't know his work at all, but they sent some of his books over, and he was the person that I and the Macmillan people were the most interested in. He also did a few sample things that were really good. He's won the Mother Goose award, which is one of the leading British awards for illustrators.

ROSS: The effect of these illustrations is quite different, isn't it, from that of Frank Newfeld's illustrations?

LEE: Yes. The demands of a Mother Goose are very heavy for an illustrator. I don't have any graphic ability; there's no way I could have achieved, myself, the visual "feel" that I sensed in the material. But the thing that's always delighted me in a Mother Goose is that you can just take the book like this and let it fall open anywhere. I'm on pages 34-35 here [in *Jelly Belly*]. The left hand page has three poems chasing each other around, which integrates them in a way. The right hand page has a single poem and illustration. Here's a double page spread of six poems [pp. 30-31]. On pages 10 and 11 here's one seven-line poem, "Hugh, Hugh" and a great big lovely illustration. So the ground rules change from page to page; they have to be separately composed each time. And the result is a sense of cornucopia, with things just tumbling off the page at you.

Another thing that's tricky about illustrating a Mother Goose type of book is that the poems are so brief, and the characters are often characterized only by their names and by the one or two memorable things they do. So if they

get to be anything more than a name and an action, it's very much up to the illustrator to provide that. I suppose it would be possible to say that's a defect in nursery rhymes, but I don't think it is. It's just their particular nature. A character like the Grand Old Duke of York exists only long enough to do this one fatuous thing, of marching up the hill and marching back down again. We don't know anything about his toilet training or his relation to his parents or whether he gets along with his wife or anything else. And most other nursery rhyme characters are of that nature. So you need someone who is a very expressive illustrator, and, to my way of thinking, in building up characters Wijngaard is that.

ROSS: Can I ask you about the decisions that get made about which poems and how many poems go on a page? Do you decide this?

LEE: It would depend. There's another person involved here too. If you look at the copyright page, facing the title page, there's a credit down here at the bottom: "Design: Robert B. McNab." Juan is not a designer, so McNab in fact blocked out the layout of pages, which involves the sort of decisions you're asking about. In my other kids' poetry books though — I hope it's invisible — the sequences are shaped and paced with a great deal of forethought and rethought and afterthought on various principles. From one book to the next, the things I was tracing through and the rhythms I was trying to get vary. For instance, in *Garbage delight* there's an oscillation between the explosive bang-bang, out-there poems that are full of a lot of external action, and ones where the speaker is inside his or her head a lot. So there's a kind of rhythm between the two, as well as between shorter and longer, funny and serious, and so on.

Here, in *Jelly Belly,* because of the cornucopia feel we were after, there is more room for throwing the pieces up in the air and letting them settle in a more random fashion. A few structural principles were obvious. There never are a lot of long poems in a Mother Goose, for instance, and I didn't want them jostling each other side by side. And closing with the three or four bedtime poems seemed to be kind of obvious. There are other little thematic groupings, like the winter poems.

Apart from that, the main structural thing going on is something that actually has not been fully realized, or well enough realized. I wish it could have been taken a step further. The book starts off in a traditional "olde timey," fairy tale, nursery rhymes, imaginary world which is basically a British one, rural or small town; gradually it builds up the characters there. You get successive looks at Jelly Belly and Liza and Mrs. McGee up her ladder and the others. Then on page 13, where Jelly Belly is running off in the distance, he's running to the town where the children live. On the front cover, the boy (who is actually Juan's own two-year-old son) and the girl are looking into the fairy tale world;

on the back cover you see that behind them is their suburban "real" world. And in the further distance there's the international downtown of high rises and traffic. So there are those three worlds that you get. The aim was to trace a kind of oscillation between the contemporary real world, the street scenes and bedrooms and whatnot that a young child lives in, and this fairy tale, nursery rhyme, Mother Goose world. That happens to some extent, but to my mind we don't get back to the Mother Goose world fully enough. I wish we went right back into that landscape again, later in the book, and things got built up more and more and we got a whole little society. As I say, that rhythm is partly there — but only partly. . . . When you're in the real world, by the way (if it is a real world), you probably notice that there are some allusions to the nursery rhyme world; Jelly Belly is there as a mobile [p. 16], for instance.

ROSS: Yes, it seems that page 16 is there as the transition, picking up references in the illustrations to previous poems.

LEE: Yes, that's the transitional page. And the transition occurs in various ways.

DAVIES: The monsters and the pig, for example, work their way through — even in the suburban scenes and in the rooms.

LEE: That's right. That was another of the governing things that carried part way but not all the way through. Then since a lot of the final blocking-out really was the designer's and the illustrator's — I was shown roughs of what was being proposed — I would just go on nerve-end responses: does this feel right? And I came back with a great many individual reactions, which were normally taken seriously and paid attention to. One of them is amusing. I guess I can say this publicly. On page 39, there's the voyage of the cowboy and the carpenter and collie and cook. Bob McNab had blocked things in very roughly to propose to Juan what the basic composition would be. I'd turned the pages five or ten times, picking up on this and that, and finally I looked at the roughing-in of these four figures on a telephone book. I saw a cowboy, and a carpenter, and a chinaman, and a cook. And I said, "Wait a minute. I don't think I wrote about anybody Chinese." Can you see how he'd read the poem?

DAVIES: Coolie [for collie]! (laughter)

LEE: I got on the phone to London immediately.

DAVIES: Did the same degree of collaboration exist in your other texts with Jon McKee [*The ordinary bath*], and with Frank Newfeld, and with Charles Pachter [*Wiggle to the laundromat*]?

LEE: Charlie went through the manuscript that was accumulating for *Alligator pie* and Nicholas Knock in about 1969, five years before it was finished, and

pulled out the poems that spoke to him most. They tended to be quite incantatory. And then he went off and worked on his own. I felt quite comfortable with that, but it wasn't a collaborative process at all. The way Frank likes to work is to listen a certain amount to what I and the publisher might say and then to gather up the manuscript and go off and work his way through it totally and then come back with what he's done. And if there were comments, they were made then, rather than on the way through. And occasionally it would happen that we were so close to pub date that production just had to begin. A few things went through that didn't completely reflect what was going on in the poem. But that was a question of timing.

Juan is a very shy man, a very private man, and also has — well, I think every good illustrator has this — a tremendous, stubborn integrity. So he was open, and yet he wasn't open at all, in ways that I respect completely and feel comfortable with. He didn't know what to make of some of the Canadian references. I think he fell in love with the process of doing the book and would have liked to spend another half year or so, which from a publishing point of view would have been impossible. So there were constraints of space and time there too. I guess I feel very much an affinity with the general way his visual imagination works. I would rather work with somebody who is not going to say, "Well, if you want the eyebrows raised a quarter of an inch, tell me and I'll happily raise them; if the eyes are the wrong shade of blue for you, tell me and I'll mix in some more purple or something." Any time I collaborate with a person like that — which has never happened with an illustrator — I end up fearing the worst: that we're not going to have the sort of fights we should be having.

ROSS: Before we conclude the interview, would you talk about your children's verse in relation to your work for adults? In *Savage fields,* for example, you map out the strife between "earth" and "world" as the irreconcilable conflict which provides the matrix for everything else that happens. The taboo thought for us now, living in the savage field, is joy. And the problem is, you point out, that even works which seek to criticize the rational, controlling stance of world are participating in, even constituting, the very symptoms that they purport to be diagnosing. So is writing children's verse and celebrating joy and playfulness in *Jelly Belly* and your other children's books a way out of the impasse you describe?

LEE: That's a complicated question. A lot of the energy that I put into writing adult poetry goes into trying to find a way of writing that will not simply be collaborative with things I feel uneasy with. I gravitate instinctively towards a form like the one in "The Death of Harold Ladoo," which starts in one place and then keeps recoiling on itself, undercutting where it is, moving forward and moving backward at the same time. I have no idea what the form is going

to be when I start, I think, because of the sorts of things you're raising. I spent twenty years trying to learn how to write adult poetry and I still feel that I'm essentially at the beginning. I started off thinking that if I opened my mouth and orotund phrases came out, they would say the way things were. I've changed quite a bit from then, and this funny kind of self-challenging structure clearly has to do with that sort of uncertainty, that sort of unease.

The kids' stuff is very traditional in form. It uses the old conventions, not the conventions of twentieth century verse. It's much more playful. Again, I've just begun to learn a bit about how to play. I guess I don't accept the choice between writing adult poetry or writing children's poetry. I do both; I do both by choice. Eventually I would like to find myself doing the two simultaneously, although quite what that would consist of I don't know. I find it very satisfying to be able to play or grieve directly, or smile directly, or feel tender or angry directly in poetry the way children's poems permit. I also feel good about the degree to which I've learned to write meditative poetry. But while I don't like it, there still seems to be a dichotomy — some things happen in one that don't happen in the other, and vice versa. I think I'd be most happy at the point where they were happening simultaneously. If you figure out how, I wish you'd tell me.

Works by Dennis Lee referred to in the interview

Wiggle to the laundromat. Toronto: New Press, 1970. Illustrations by Charles Pachter.
Alligator pie. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld.
Nicholas Knock. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld.
Savage fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology. Toronto: Anansi, 1977.
Garbage delight. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld.
The ordinary bath. Toronto: Magook and McClelland and Stewart, 1979. Illustrations by Jon McKee.
"The Death of Harold Ladoo," in *The Gods.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979.
Jelly Belly. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983. Illustrations by Juan Wijngaard.

See also by Dennis Lee, "Roots and Play: Writing as a 35-Year Old Children," *Canadian Children's Literature,* 4 (1976), 28-58.

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