# Jelly Belly in the Perilous Forest

*M.A. Thompson*

I patched my coat with sunlight.
It lasted for a day.
I patched my coat with moonlight.
But the lining came away.
I patched my coat with lightning
And if flew off in the storm.
I patched my coat with darkness:
That coat has kept me warm.[1]

I start with that poem because I am going to say some harsh things about a writer for children who has almost been canonized here, and I suspect that I am going to offend some of his admirers. But I want to establish early that I, too, am an admirer; and that poem gives me good reason to believe that he would understand what I am talking about when I say that there is something wanting in Canadian writing for children as a whole. The poet, of course, is Dennis Lee, and the something I might call, using his work, "darkness," but I am going to try to define it more precisely than that, first by looking at some places we can and cannot find it, and secondly by appealing to some of the more lucid theorists about children's writing. And then I may be able to explain why I think Dennis Lee at once so good, so important, so bad, and so dangerous.

Dangerous may seem a strong word to use about the author of *Jelly Belly,*[2] for the latest book is, everyone agrees, fun: like *Alligator pie,* like *Garbage delight,* but not, please note, like *Nicholas Knock* (which doesn't even get a mention in the blurb of *Jelly Belly).* That Dennis Lee is fun, and that everyone — critics, children, librarians, teachers, parents — agrees he is: those are the two points from which I am going to start my objections. Now, I like fun too, and I am far from wanting to be a wet blanket, but I do remember the sinking feeling I got as a child when faced with something that adults assured me would be fun. It meant I would, in politeness, have to manifest enthusiasm for something that was probably silly, loud, and monotonous. And my objection to "fun" remains essentially the same: it may mean honest foolery, or it may mean a brash imitation of it. Both kinds are to be found in Mr. Lee's poetry, and sorting them out would be a useful exercise, but not what I intend here, because both kinds of fun pretty well exclude the element I am trying to find. So I'll begin defining it by saying that it is essentially serious, and presume

that if you are still with me you do not subscribe to the common misconception that writing for children can't also be deeply serious; and so I can omit defending my yearning for something more than fun.

That everyone agrees on Mr. Lee's wonderfulness is the basis for my second objection, and I think that I am being more than wilfully egregious in making it. The things that everyone can agree on are, generally, pap, and (etymology apart) pap is not for children. It is, however, for earnest and liberal-minded adults (who don't like having to argue because it's uncomfortable and they don't do it very well), for the well-intentioned pluralists who make decisions about children's books in Canada, and for merchandisers who can't afford to offend anyone. Given all that, it's hardly surprising to find that pap is very common, and that its popularity is at the expense of more substantial fare.

Let me give one example. Despite abundant satire, Christmas becomes more relentlessly secular every year, and is now overwhelmingly dominated by Santa Claus. And Santa Claus is pap. Unlike Jesus, he isn't going to raise any very strong emotions, he isn't going to offend anyone, and he carries no ethical baggage to impede a well-run promotion. And, of course, he is for the children, though no child who is past the age of literal belief has any use for him except as a player in the gift-getting game. Let me make myself clear: I am not saying that Dennis Lee's poetry is pap. What I am saying is that his popularly conceived appeal, based on a few of his best-known poems, is pap. Many of his readers, I suspect, just don't read the poems that aren't "Alligator Pie" or its clone. They find his "heavier" poetry embarrassing, and that would account for the relative unpopularity of *Nicholas Knock*. It's a bit as though Santa Claus were to stand up and start haranguing us on abortion or the cruise missile. This may not help very much in defining what Canadian writing for children lacks, but it might help to explain why it is lacking.

The last poem in *Jelly Belly* is called "Silvery," and, like so many poems in the book, it recalls earlier poems for children. This time the precedent is not in Mother Goose, but in Walter de la Mare's *Peacock pie* (which *Alligator pie* may have been meant to evoke). "Silver" is one of several de la Mare poems that catch the evanescent, the sense of the world transformed, of wonder, fantasy, magic. These things used to be thought the exclusive and only property of children, and the writers of de la Mare's generation strained for that effect in their children's pieces with results that are often tedious or risible, depending on your bent. But de la Mare is a master, and reading *Peacock pie* again, after the brightness and bounciness of modern children's verse, was like stepping from a raucous party into a fragrant garden: I had a whiff of what I was looking for.

Let me show you something closer to home. *Pernilla in the perilous forest*[3] is both recent and Canadian, though its sources, like Mr. Lee's in *Jelly Belly*, are very old, and European. In it a little girl goes in search of a horse, through

the perilous forest, where she encounters seven animals, each of which is unsuited to be her horse, and each of which represents one of the seven deadly sins. Like me, Pernilla doesn't know what she is looking for, but she knows when she finds it:

Then, through an opening in the trees she saw a meadow of silver grasses and daisies. And in the middle of the meadow stood a unicorn.

His silver horn glinted in the moonlight. His noble head was as radiant as the inside of a sea-shell. His eyes were sapphire-blue and his hoofs were ivory-white.

"Will you be my horse, to eat sugar from my hand and lay your head in my lap?" asked Pernilla softly.

Through innumerable readings, that passage has continued to have its effect on me: the hair on the back of my head rises. Now I am far from holding, with A.E. Housman, that that is an infallible and sufficient sign of poetry, but I think that I can explicate what is going on here, and where the passage gets its strength. It is the climax of the book, and a number of things come together with the inevitable but surprising rightness that is the mark of a really good ending. The adult reader gets the additional thrill of realizing that Pernilla is, of course, the virgin for whom the unicorn might be said to have been searching, so we have here the confluence of two quests. The unicorn is, certainly, a horse, and so the literal answer to the little girl's quest, but much more than that. He is a magical horse: even those not versed in folklore could not miss the import of the description. He is a phallic horse, too. When Pernilla asks her formulaic question, it is rhetorical, because we know that the unicorn is the end not only of the quest she knows she is on, but of all the quests she does not know she is on. Where the seven other animals have made aggressive and rude replies, the unicorn's only answer is an act of submission. We are reminded that in its purity, in its association with a virgin, and in its death in the hunt, the unicorn was seen as an analogue for Christ. Pernilla's is a great quest, and it is not mere coincidence that she pursues it through encounters with sin.

I am not suggesting, of course, that child readers will be aware of all this, but Muriel Whitaker, who wrote the story, is a mediaevalist, and quite conscious of the traditions she calls up. She draws on the great powers of myth and of dream. Like Antaeus, she has the strength to lift her readers, because she stands on the solid ground of ancient story. And children know this, not consciously, but unconsciously. The great stories appeal to children because they give them access to profundities that they are incapable of articulating. I will not here belabour a point made so well already by writers of the stature of Kornei Chukovsky and Bruno Bettelheim. Let me merely give a concrete example from the work at hand. A three-year-old can have only a very imperfect idea of sin, if at all, yet my daughter knows that there is something wrong when her harried mother flails out at her in a disproportionate fury. Together we read *Pernilla,* and we both know that I do a particularly fine rendition of the wolf:

"Get out of here. Get out of here before I eat you!" he shouted angrily.

We can enjoy that together, and share the knowledge that the wolf cannot be Pernilla's horse, that she will go away from him, and on until she finds the unicorn. Here are the errors and sorrows of life transformed to the understanding and pleasures of art. That is what literature should do.

That the "darkness" I am looking for is serious, and anti-secular, and has something to do with the unicorn leads me to say that it is religious, but I am certainly not advocating that what Canadian children need is more Bible stories, or a new generation of tract-spouting prigs for heroes.

> *Religio,* in one Latin sense of the word, implies a sense of the strange, the numinous, the totally Other, of what lies quite beyond human personality and cannot be found in any human relationships. This kind of 'religion' is an indestructible part of the experience of many human minds, even though the temper of a secular society does not encourage it, and the whole movement of modern theology runs counter to it. In Christian 'religious instruction' there is likely to be less and less *religio:* it may very well be in reading about a vision of the flashing-eyed Athene or the rosy-fingered Aphrodite that children first find a satisfying formulation of those queer prickings of delight, excitement and terror that they feel when they first walk by moonlight, or when it snows in May, or when, like the young Wordsworth, they have to touch a wall to make sure it is really there.[4]

That is Elizabeth Cook, and she starts her useful definition by saying that legends and fairy tales open the door to *religio,* "and for some children, at the present time, there may be no other key to it." But poetry has always been seen as a key to it, and if a generation of Canadians who hated poetry on principle have not only taken to reading Dennis Lee, but actually enjoy him and convey that enjoyment to children, that is not only a minor miracle, but a measure of his power, for good or ill. The question, then, is what is he doing with that power.

*Jelly Belly,* like most books of poetry, is a mixed blessing. Since the effect of a book like this is inseparable from its illustrations, I must begin by saying that they are perhaps the greatest blessing of all. Reviewers of *Jelly Belly* have been unkind to Frank Newfeld, calling his pictures "clownish" or "cartoons." They do not exaggerate, but it took Juan Wijngaard to make us see what we were missing (as, perhaps, a look at *Wiggle to the laundromat* would make us more gentle with Newfeld). Wijngaard's illustrations do more than give the charm of a pastel realism, of the continuity of the same small characters recurring. In themselves, they lift the poems into fantasy. Consider the way the first six poems are linked, so that Jelly Belly, Liza Briggs, Miss Dimble, Hugh, Mrs. Magee, and the Old Lady all inhabit the same landscape, a kind of idealized prairie, complete with magpies, distant mountains, and stooks of grain, which is rediscovered with each poem as we literally review it from each character's perspective. The everyday world, Mr. Wijngaard suggests, is alive with magic if we only learn how to look. Everything in the book is put into relation to

something else, so that, more than any of Mr. Lee's previous books, *Jelly Belly,* exists as a whole, and it is this exhilarating sense of wholeness, of the possibility of grasping the universe in its entirety, from dinosaurs (wittily, the black-tie diners in the wild west) to astronauts on the moon, that is Mr. Wijngaard's greatest gift to us.

But what of the poems themselves? The prize piece, I think, is "Mrs. Murphy, and Mrs. Murphy's Kids." The idea of the poem has that kind of insistent logic from which great fantasy is born: supposing children just kept growing. In the end, like mythical giants, the kids inhabit a mountain. When even that breaks, Mrs. Murphy applies traditional wisdom:

So she waited for a year,
  And she waited for another,
And the kids grew up
  And had babies like their mother.

And Mrs. Murphy's kids —
  You can think what you please —
Kept all *their* kids
  In a can of peas.

That is right and reassuring, and so the cycle begins again. I take the poet's license to think that Mrs. Murphy and her kids are a charming example of Canadian ingenuity and conservatism. Mrs. Murphy adapts successfully to her actual environment and predicament, and her kids copy her: an idealized history of the country. But the particular delight of this poem is the way the spare stanza of the start gets progressively crammed with syllables, so that the pace of the reading accellerates, and we feel the pressure of the growing kids on their constricting homes and their mother. What a shame, then, that all this is marred by:

But the kids kept growing
  And the sink went *kaplooey,*
So she dumped them on their ears
  In a crate of chop suey

*Kaplooey?* The idea is clearly to rhyme "chop suey," but wouldn't some other food have been possible? Ogden Nash would never have stooped to that. I can accept that "the fence went *pop,*" because I know what that means, but what is going *kaplooey?* Or, for that matter, what does it mean that the crate got stuck? Mr. Lee claims to revise his children's poems up to forty times, and if that is true, it is all the more appalling that such loose diction could be allowed to stand forty rigorous re-writings. Lest it be objected that I am unfair in attacking nonsense words in children's verse, I protest that I can accept them in their place, but I insist that the whole delight of this poem is in its literal-

mindedness: its nonsense is on another level.

The first six and the last three poems in the book are amongst the best in the book, and come close to evoking *religio*. "News of the Day" momentarily calls up a sense of wonder, as does "Zinga, Zinga." "The Ghost and Jenny Jemima," really belongs to a familiar genre that we might call the shaggy ghost story. Some of the best poems in the book — "Knock, Knock," "Kitty Ran up the Tree," "Peterkin Pete" — are also the most derivative, and so the question that keeps floating around this avowed disciple of Mother Goose must be answered: do we really need re-dressed nursery rhymes? Mr. Lee's answer is far back in *Alligator pie:*

> When I started reading nursery rhymes to my children, I quickly developed a twitch. All we seemed to read about were jolly millers, little pigs, and queens. The details of *Mother Goose* — the wassails and Dobbins and pipers and pence — had become exotic; children loved them, but they were no longer home ground.
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> Not that this was a bad thing. But I started to wonder: shouldn't a child also discover the imagination playing on things she lived with every day? not abolishing Mother Goose, but letting her take up residence among hockey sticks and high-rise too?[5]

Well, yes, but, the crack about millers, pigs, and queens notwithstanding, that is just what the old rhymes do. They never really needed an injection of hockey sticks and high-rises, nor of Spadina and Bloor which, after all, are as remote to a child in Regina as Gloucester or London. *Jelly Belly* is, mercifully, almost free of poems whose whole content is rhymes for Canadian place names, but most of these little verses have almost nothing to them. I do not mean that they are easy to write, but would anyone really have bothered to publish:

> Oh-oh spaghetti-o
> Eat it with confetti-o
> When it's ready, let it go!

had it been by a less well-known writer? So if we set aside the poems marred by loose diction, and the poems which barely exist in the first place, and the enchanting pictures, there is little enough left of *Jelly Belly*. Now I know that this book is intended for small children, and that that necessarily restricts the range of the poems (though less than is sometimes supposed), but the only real justification for re-doing Mother Goose is by doing something new, or better, or at least different. It just isn't here.

It was not always so with Dennis Lee. *Alligator pie,* his first commercial success, was a mixture of fun and serious, simple and complex. Then came *Nicholas Knock,* for older children, and the least popular of Mr. Lee's children's books, for reasons which I have touched at the beginning of this essay. Readers who had enjoyed laughing at the nonsense of the earlier volume were discomfited by poems like "Summer Song":

Breath and death and pestilence
Were not revoked by that.
Heavy things went on, among
The calm magnificat.
Yet as I sat, my body spoke
The words of my return:
*There is a joy of being, which you*
*Must sit still and learn.*

You cannot read a poem like that to a child without traversing a territory that few enough adults are prepared to walk alone, never mind in the company of a child. Better to hope for a way around. *Religio,* you see, has replaced sex as the great unmentionable. Yet, if *Nicholas Knock* has a theme, it is *religio* and the hunger of a secular world, Nicholas's quest for the silver honkabeest, the Ookpik. There are poems here which should not be lost: "The Thing" and "Wellington the Skeleton" — both funny and both profound — "Winter Song," "The Coat," and "Summer Song." Perhaps because of the kind of response he got from his readers, but for whatever reason, Mr. Lee has produced no more books like that. *Garbage delight* was much more like *Alligator pie* — replete with bounceable nonsense. And now, *Jelly Belly,* for younger children still, has only the faintest touch of *religio* and much of that in the illustrations.

I realize that my criticisms may seem to be carping. There is much to be grateful for in this latest book, and it has an undeniable charm which has — rightly — captivated its reviewers. But I remember another Dennis Lee, who was a poet for children, and not a rhymster only, and I fear that he is in danger of becoming another Santa Claus — restricted to the very young (whose breadth of conception and discrimination are limited), inoffensive to adults, cross-cultural, fun, marketable. If that happens, we will all, whether we know it or not, be poorer.

NOTES

[1]"The Coat," Dennis Lee, *Nicholas Knock and other people,* illus. Frank Newfeld (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 47. This poem first appeared in *Wiggle to the laundromat.*

[2]Dennis Lee, *Jelly Belly,* illus. Juan Wijngaard. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983).

[3]Muriel Whitaker, illus. Jetske Ironside, *Pernilla in the perilous forest* (Oberon, 1979).

[4]Elizabeth Cook, *The ordinary and the fabulous,* 2nd. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), p. 5.

[5]Dennis Lee, *Alligator pie,* illus. Frank Newfeld. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 63.

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