Si une pièce de théâtre se lit (d'où l'intérêt d'un français littéraire, je suppose), elle est écrite avant tout pour être mise en scène. Cette pièce a été mise en scène à Ottawa dans un théâtre de marionnettes, ainsi que le montre une série de photos qui illustre le livre.

Je voyais plutôt des adultes déguisés en enfants jouer cette pièce, vision certainement influencée par le français utilisé.

Le mieux ne serait-il pas de laisser les enfants jouer eux- mêmes? Le langage ne devrait pas être un obstacle, si on les laisse réinventer le texte pour n'en garder que la substantifique moëlle. Et puis, ils s'amuseraient comme des petits fous à se déverser des sacs d'école sur la tête. Pour une fois qu'ils seraient autorisés à faire une bêtise!!

Une boîte magique très embêtante est une pièce éducative. L'action y est bien menée et si inattendue parfois qu'on ne peut s'empêcher de rire avec elle.

Alors ne laissez pas cette pièce sur une étagère de la bibliothèque, elle est trop jolie pour ne pas être représentée à la fête de l'école.

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TO STRETCH A CHILD'S COMPREHENSION

The little boy who cried himself to sea, Eugenia Fernandes Kids Can Press, 1982. 32pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-42-7; ***Christopher and the elevator closet,*** Allen Morgan. Illus Franklin Hammond. Kids Can Press, 1982. 48 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-40-0; ***Molly and Mr. Maloney,*** Allen Morgan. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Kids Can Press, 1982. 48 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-9l9964-41-9; ***The green harpy at the corner store,*** Rosemary Allison. Illus. Claire Watson Garcia. Kids Can Press, 1976. 36 pp. paper. ISBN 0-9l9964-09-5; ***I'm only afraid of the dark (at Night!!),*** Patti Stren. Illus. author. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982. 38 pp. $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88902-593-2; ***No clothes,*** David Wood. Illus. Carlos Freire. Annick Press Ltd., 1982. 40 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-45-6; ***The day the fairies went on strike,*** Linda Briskin and Maureen Fitzgerald. Illus. Barbara Eidlitz. Press Gang Publishers, 1982. 36 pp. $4.95. ISBN 0-88974-024-0; ***Ruthie's big tree,*** Shirley Day. Illus. author. Annick Press Ltd., 1982. 32 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-38-8; ***The little red cart,*** A.P. Campbell. Illus. Andrea Campbell. Borealis Press, 1979. 20 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-38-8.

The measure of adjustment that an adult must make when writing for children is difficult to judge. Sir Walter Scott, when writing *Tales of a grandfather,*

moved from an initial "simplicity of style not quite. . . [his]. . . own" to "a style considerably more elevated" because the latter proved to be "more interesting to his juvenile reader" — a six year old. He had concluded "that to write *down* to children's understanding is a mistake," that, in fact, "there is benefit. . . in presenting a child with ideas somewhat beyond his easy and immediate comprehension." Today we tend to distrust this view and object that Scott's style at its simplest is far above our six year olds' heads.

The little boy who cried himself to sea is officially for ages one-five. Not at all Scott's idea of a book to stretch a child's comprehension, but one which ought nevertheless to delight very young children. The situation is one familiar to most parents and children. Mother decides that her boy needs a nap. Then follow the all-too-familiar tears. But these ones continue making so much water that the bed floats out of the window and on out to sea. Various sea creatures entertain the boy until he falls asleep. Mother hears him asleep, follows his route to sea and tows him back to his room. The story is charming. Its impossibly fluid plot reflects children's imaginative variations on fact and logic. Yet the book is little more than a soporific composed when the author was attempting to induce that state in her own offspring. One wonders if it is more for entertaining adults while the child falls into a doze than for entertaining children — the title plays on the implied half rhyme between "sea" and "sleep," an adult quip.

Those in Scott's day stressed education at the expense of a child's pleasure, assuming adult entertainments would suffice, so we would say. We aim to produce books that are more for children than for adults, often a little too much so. Standards of literacy and intellectual capacity have declined dramatically since Scott's time, it seems. We ought to ask how much of this is because we give children what we know they can handle rather than what they are capable of reaching for. Too often we pamper our children so that they never grow to their full potential.

Allen Morgan's *Christopher and the elevator closet* is claimed to be "a great book to read by yourself." It has repetition, a relatively simply vocabulary and not too many words on each page; in this respect it is suited to reading beginners. The story is fair but it has an underlying tone that is not fair. Christopher discovers that his closet is also an elevator. He ascends to the clouds and meets a giant — faint echoes of Jack and the Beanstalk although this one is friendly. He grows clouds as a gardener grows cabbages; thunder and lightning result when he liberates the fully grown specimens with dynamite. The instant conversion of closet into elevator concurs with a child's imaginative ability to treat blends of fantasy and reality as reasonable, and is therefore "fair game." But the new mythology will not be seen by children of reading age as reasonable. Simplified explanations of natural phenomena are allowable; deliberate false explanations, however ingenious, are reprehensible. Many young readers will interpret this as condescension. Franklin Hammond's illustrations are also to

be criticised. Christopher is an ugly brute and the various giants are bigger versions of the same, though perhaps more "dumpy" than ugly. (see fig. 1).

A second book in this series by Morgan, *Molly and Mr. Maloney,* deserves kinder remarks. The illustrations by Maryann Kovalski are warmer, the characters are human and friendly (see Fig. 2). Both books are divided into chapters. The former merely provides convenient stopping places, but in *Molly and Mr. Maloney* there are three separate entertaining stories. Molly, commissioned by her mother to bring eggs home without breaking them, finds herself in a predicament when one of the eggs breaks itself and releases a voracious dinoasaur. Fortunately it is soon employed by the city, eating garbage. Mr. Maloney provides a replacement egg, and mother is surprisingly unperturbed by Molly's account. Next, Molly helps make an enormous peanut-butter sandwich for Mr. Maloney's racoon. The racoon, a spoilt individual, will not eat it, so Molly and Mr. Maloney have to. Molly returns home to find her mother has made peanut-butter sandwiches; Molly cannot eat them. One expects a conflict to ensue, but no. Mother's lack of response is similar in the last story too. She warns Molly not to make a mess when having her bath. The racoon sneaks in, has a "lovely time" and leaves just before mother arrives. Molly explains and mother is "not mad." Is she cynical of Molly's explanations, trusting, or just long-suffering? This anticlimax, with its lack of anticipated conflict, makes a weak plot. But the book has good entertainment value and is helpful for children learning to read.

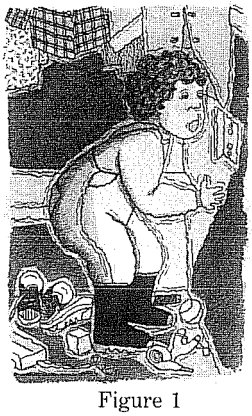

Figure 1

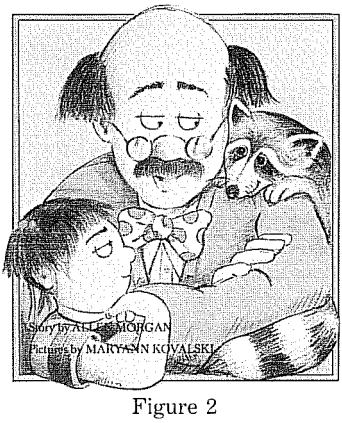

Figure 2

Neither of Morgan's books, of course, teaches much beyond reading skills. Scott's model, *Tales,* by way of contrast is a book of Scottish history with only a modicum of entertainment. A book which entertains and instructs would be the ideal. ***The green harpy at the corner store*** offers this. The harpy breaks a wing hitting the CN tower, and crash lands outside Babas' corner store. Babas' family look after her until her wing is mended, during which time she proves

entertaining both at home and school. She is akin to Mr. Maloney's racoon, with her unbroken wing as an instrument of chaos. The story introduces children to one of the many Canadian cultures: the harpy is from Greek mythology and she is given Greek hospitality — including "spoonsweets" — by a Greek family; while the setting is Canadian, with a picture of the Toronto skyline at the back and front of the book, a corner store, plenty of snow, and real Toronto street names.

Another book which keeps a balance between instruction and entertainment is Patti Stren's latest, *I'm only afraid of the dark (at night!!)*. Fernandes' and Morgan's books end with the convenient *consolatio* of the young character falling asleep. For Stren the sleep ingredient becomes the story. Harold, a young owl living at the North Pole with his family, is afraid of the dark. The situation is the more serious because in winter, at that locality, it is always dark. In addition, owls sleep in the day and work at night. Gert, Harold's favourite sister, devises a programmed cure, which produces hilarity and some success. The story ends with a twist. Harold finds that Gert is secretly terrified of the dark too. But he responds nobly, and they resolve to work at it together — an approach that contrasts with Gert's program, indicating a more realistic way of dealing with such fears. The illustrations provide humorous comic-strip accompaniment with secondary comments, which will encourage children to read to themselves rather than merely be read to (see fig. 3). But the grammar they will be tackling is very sloppy. This is not a simple book. There are plenty of details to notice, jokes to enjoy. It is expensive, but an attention-keeper that can be read again and again with fresh pleasure.

Figure 3

Scott's aim to stretch a child's capacities of comprehension led to stories that were too adult in style, a problem not present in the books considered so far. *No clothes* by Daniel Wood, also about a childhood fear, moves in Scott's direction. Simon, a nine year old, is afraid of being seen naked. He loses his clothes after taking a secret swim in the nude, and has to get home invisibly, a predicament that generates amusing episodes. In this respect the book is of good value. It is one of Annick's easy-to-read books, aimed at Simon's age group. The vocabulary is a little advanced for a modern nine year old but that means only

that the child must work at it, thereby benefiting. The humour is often subtle, based on ironies; for example, Mr. Pittendrigh, summoned "from the TV room" by his wife's announcement that a naked boy is outside her window, pronounces anathema on such behaviour: " 'Kids!' he said. 'I wish they wouldn't do things like that. It's TV. That's what I say.' " Such hypocrisy would escape a child's notice, though he might be taught to notice it. One suspects, however, that Wood is writing from his adult point of view rather than aiming to stretch children's literary capacities. In the brief biographical sketch of Wood given in the book we are told that "As a child, Daniel Wood vowed to himself that *no one* would ever see him naked." He is retrospectively describing his own childhood fear as an adult. Unlike Stren's, this story does nothing to dispel the fear; rather it tends to reinforce what is orginally an adult guilt and embarrassment in children who may yet have vestiges of an Edenic nature. A more serious adult perspective appears on the opening page. Simon, upon discovering his loss, imagines the impending embarrassments and says: "I wish I was dead. . . I think I'll drown myself." A sentiment like this in a children's book is cause for grave concern.

This last comment illustrates an additional problem. It matters *what* a book teaches. *The day the fairies went on strike* is another example of adults intruding on the relatively innocent world of children. It deals with the contemporary issue of protest at a child's level. Hester has a craving for cherries from the local cherry tree, already occupied by a gang called "The Pirates" who refuse to let her climb it. She finds fairies but they cannot grant her "wish" for a replacement tree, because they are kept busy fulfilling the demands of other fairies, "the Me-firsts." Hester applies union tactics, the "collective" etc., something she has learnt from her mother. There is a strike by the worker fairies, and "the Me-firsts" are forced to set aside their demands and share the work. Then Hester's wish is modestly granted: one of the cherry pits she had planted sprouts. There follows a puzzling episode with Hester hanging from a branch in the Pirates' tree, and then a not very satisfying ending:

> Suddenly Hester found herself climbing the tree. When she got to the. . . terrible sign "Pirates Only," she laughed a great loud laugh. She knew just what to do.
> She turned the sign around and with a big marker wrote, "Hester was here."
> And she knew she would be back.

No doubt! A perceptive child would ruefully add "And she knew what the Pirates would do to her when they found her." The plot is weak. The principle has been conveyed at the expense of the story. The fairies are stripped of their mythological fineries; it is more Hester who helps them than vice versa. The values communicated are false ones. Hester is a champion against the greedy "Me-firsts," yet she lusts after cherries, and covets a cherry tree already owned by the pirates. If she could only have access to the tree: "Then she would eat a cherry omelet for breakfast, cherry sandwiches for lunch and a cherry ham-

burger for dinner." We are then told she "decided the neighbourhood needed another cherry tree," a false charity surely; she is only concerned for her own cravings. The story teaches a child to take what it wants, if need be to use the collected pressure of others who want the same, rather than to be satisfied with the little one already has. Everything the child does not possess is to be treated as common property. The picture of "Me-firsts" as the idle rich and the other fairies as the poor workers communicates a false mythology (see fig. 4). There are also in this world rich workers and idle poor. The book denudes the natural, moral sense in children and substitutes adult materialistic mores; it is little more than invidious propaganda.

Figure 4

Shirley Day's *Ruthie's big tree* tackles the same issue. Old Man Tester decides to cut down the tree in which Ruthie plays. Its presence in his vacant lot (which is for sale) has discouraged buyers. This time the opposition is a real individual rather than an impersonal mob of generalities called "Me-firsts." The situation is real, too. Ruthie refuses to get out of the tree when the tree service arrives, and stays there through the night. The right buyers come along and want the tree to stay. All the local children rejoice, including those of the buyers. Ecological principles make a cursory appearance — birds are mentioned — but the main motive, a natural one, is Ruthie's concern that she (and by implication her friends) be able to continue to play in the tree. The story is more evident than the principles conveyed, yet those principles are present. One complaint is that the grammar is not always examplary, "she had a secret place to sit" lacks the preposition, and "It sounded like the tree was calling her name" needs "as if" to replace "like." Better grammar could not hurt the story and would help, however slightly, to raise the ever-slumping standard of literary competence in Canada.

The language in *The little red cart* is good and relatively rich, and the story is a lengthy one. A.P. Campbell does not write down to his readers; in fact the style ensures that the book will appeal to a larger range than most of those already mentioned. Rory MacPhee, from Cape Breton, has a problem with short legs. He is always late for school. One day, making a special effort to arrive

on time, he sacrifices his hopes of success when he helps an old man cross the street. The old man rewards him with a magic cart, a modern equivalent to the flying carpet that moves very fast on command. Rory makes his sacrifice with no expectation of reward; he operates according to the principle of love rather than that of self-service as in *The day the fairies went on strike.* He is never late for school again. The principle of helping others continues. The old man finances Rory's time at college so that he can become a doctor, on condition that Rory do likewise for another in the future. And the cart is passed on generation by generation to a succession of short-legged MacPhees. Mystery, adventure, and momentary tragedy make this a solid, good story too; it is not merely a vehicle for moralizing. Some complaint, however, ought to be made about the illustrations, which are in a child's style and appear condescending. A child of eight or more would feel this to be so, those younger perhaps not. All in all, though, this is a gem, combining entertainment with instruction and, for those developing reading skills, sketching their capacity a little.

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FOUR MORAL TALES

Dusty, Ellen Schwarz. Illus. Ann Swanson Gross. Solstice Books, 1983. 24 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-919569-02-l; ***Don't dilly dally dear,*** Joan Vowles. Illus. C. Elizabeth Baker. Lyndon House Publishing, 1981. 29 pp. 3.25 paper. ISBN 0-920948-04-9; ***Angelina and her friend Georgio the squirrel,*** Gabrielle Kirschbaum. Illus. Rosemary Kenny. Borealis Press, 1979. 8 pp. paper. ISBN 0-88887-036-1; ***A cart full of strays,*** Lue McNamee. Illus. Terry McNamee. Peguis Publishing, Ltd., 38 pp. $4.50 cloth. ISBN 0-9l9566-67-7.

There is a distinguished tradition in children's literature from which these four books noticeably depart. All four read as if the authors have decided to write a book to demonstrate that it is wrong to dawdle, wrong to tell lies, and so on. This is very laudable but a moralising tale needs skillful handling, and should be avoided by authors with little talent for the trade. I note that two were written by school teachers. These four books impress me as formless, burdened with long paragraphs, slang, and bad illustrations.

Dusty is the story of young girl's obsession with a bicycle. The story is set in Denmark; it rambles tediously on until the girl is told she may not take her