

POEMS FOR CHILDREN?

A spider danced a cosy jig, Irving Layton. Illus. Miro Malish. Ed. Elspeth Cameron. Stoddart Publishing, 1984. Unpaginated \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-0079-X; *Flight of the roller-coaster; poems for younger readers*, Raymond Souster. Selected by Richard Wollatt. Oberon Press, 1985. 89 pp. \$11.95 paper. ISBN 0-88750-5805.

It is a challenge to compare selections by two established Canadian poets who began their careers together in the 1940s as social realist rather than mythopoeic poets. Though Layton's book claims to be addressed to "poetry lovers of all ages," it looks, with its colour illustrations, to be directed at the children's market. Souster's book is explicitly described as "Poems for younger readers." One doubts whether any of the poems by either poet were written with children exclusively in mind. What we seem to have rather, in both cases, are selections of poems that it is hoped will appeal to children — selections made by someone other than the poet. So one way to compare the books might be to ask oneself which book would I buy for my child?

For me the answer would be the Layton book for several reasons. The Layton book is cheaper, though in hard cover, than the Souster book in paper cover which is surely unusual and certainly appealing to the skinflint parent, relative or librarian. As a children's book it will also be more durable. A better reason is that *A spider danced a cosy jig* is beautifully illustrated in colour by Miro Malish with rather weird illustrations (fig. 1) that link the animal and human worlds by giving the creatures human faces. This may stimulate the sometimes reluctant child poetry reader to at least leaf through the book once if only to look at the pictures. *Flight of the roller-coaster* in contrast has only one colour plate, albeit a puzzling one, on the front cover (fig. 2). The Layton book contains less poems than the Souster book and is balanced by its colour illustrations making it more attractive to children. Although the Layton book claims to be "a book of poetry lovers of all ages" it would likely appeal to younger children more readily not only because of the illustrations but also because of the large size of its print. The Souster book though ostensibly for "Younger Readers" seems most suitable for children over twelve with an interest in poetry since this is simply a book of poems without the sweetening of illustrations. Richard Wollatt's useful "Introduction" encourages the "Young Readers" to write poems of their own.

But what of the poems themselves, particularly as poems likely to interest children? Souster it might seem at first sight is more likely to reach children because of his simplicity. "Flight of the roller-coaster", one of his most memorable poems and rightly the title poem here, is a poem that one would not hesitate to teach to a class of children in the hope that they would enjoy



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

it. Richard Wollatt's selection is well made and I can't think of a Souster poem that might interest children that he has omitted. But, perhaps, to accent simplicity is deceptive. Layton has always seemed to me the better poet of the two. Why should children be any less receptive to quality than adults? Layton's rhythms are stronger, his language livelier (as in the volume's title poem or "The Perverse Gulls") than Souster's. Children like both of these qualities as the popularity of Dennis Lee's volumes has recently demonstrated. Again, in Layton's case, Elspeth Cameron seems to me to have picked the right poems. The only poem of Layton's in my view that might have been included that isn't is "Song of the Naomi," one of his tenderest poems that concerns his daughter. Admittedly it is a poem *about* rather than *for* a child and as my education tutor at Nottingham University always insisted why teach children "Fern Hill"? How can you expect children to respond to adult nostalgia about childhood?

All things considered, then, I would buy the Layton rather than the Souster book for my child for two reasons. First, because Layton is the better poet and second because the illustrations (despite their weirdness) enhance the poems and would, I believe, help to draw the young reader into the wonderful and connected worlds of poetry and art.

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