

Review articles & reviews/ *Critiques et comptes rendus*

SEAN O HUIGIN'S CHILDREN'S VERSE

Atmosfear, sean o huigin. Illus. Barbara Di Lella. Black Moss Press, 1985. Unpaginated \$4.95. ISBN 0-88753-134-2; *Blink* (a strange book for children), sean o huigin. Illus. Barbara Di Lella. Black Moss Press, 1984. Unpaginated, \$5.95. ISBN 0-88753-118-0; *The dinner party*, sean o huigin. Illus. Maureen Paxton. Black Moss Press, 1984. Unpaginated, \$5.95. ISBN 0-88753-117-2.

One of the few good Canadian poets writing for children now, sean o huigin gives us in this trio of poetry picture books more of the inventive and playful writing for which his *Ghost horse of the Mounties* was awarded the 1983 Canada Council Children's Literature Prize. Each book is built on a fantastic premise, and plays with tension between fantasy and reality. In *Atmosfear* the fantasy is didactic — environmental destruction symbolized by a monster; *The dinner party* is sheer nonsense, with overtone of parody; *Blink* ventures into an increasingly scary vision but ends in reassurance.

The verse form in each book is simple, with very short lines (rarely more than three or four syllables), and a regular rhyme in *Atmosfear* and *The dinner party*. Like all of o huigin's work, these books lend themselves to being read aloud; younger readers left to their own devices, however, may have trouble perceiving the patterns and rhymes of the verse as it is printed.

take warning now
this is no joke
we're doomed by
all the dust and
smoke we pour into
the air each day

or

the next entree
was made of nails
finger
toe
all mixed with
snails whose

bodies had
been mushed
and crushed

This form of course encourages greater sensitivity to the words and rhythms, and greater flexibility on the part of the reader, thus avoiding the awful mechanical singsong in which rhymed poetry tends to be read. In his *A simple introduction to experimental poetry* (Black Moss Press, c.1978) o huigin gives a clear and persuasive account of some of the aims and techniques of experiments such as sound and concrete poetry; a careful reading of this admirable little book might silence some of the grumbling educators who have reprimanded o huigin for his disregard of conventional punctuation. I have, however, one quibble with o huigin and his editors. *Atmosfear* ends with the beast

waiting for we foolish
men to bring about
our own sad end.

If there is a poetic justification for the error in grammar here, other than the alliteration of “waiting” and “we”, I’ve missed it; “we” just sounds wrong.

Atmosfear evokes the Kraken myth with its destructive beast asleep under the ocean (here the ice of Antarctica), and links it to the modern problem of environmental pollution. If we don’t find “another way/a kinder way/to treat the world”, says o huigin, the beast will awaken and destroy us. This linking of fantasy and real social problem is somewhat dubious; o huigin is very good at creating improbable, pleasantly scary monsters and monstrous situations, but they seem inappropriate here. When the threat is so real and so serious, why call in dragons from Antarctica to scare us?

The mix of fantasy and reality is more successful in *Blink*, perhaps because instead of didacticism there is an invitation to the reader to exercise both senses and imagination.

what if
all of a
sudden
you
lived
in two
places
at
once
?

The imagined experience of seeing double or living a double life begins placidly enough with seeing life in the city from your left eye and life in the country from your right, but it escalates into finding yourself in two different coun-

tries, then to being half in the real world and half in a bizarre world. The child or "you" experiencing this bifurcation becomes more and more distressed, as no one believes her account of what's happening to her, and she tries repeatedly but unsuccessfully to wake and dispel the strange double vision. Finally she *is* awakened, to a normal world, and the book ends on a note of relief and delight. The humourous, rather quiet illustrations help to keep the fantasy amusing rather than frightening. (Di Lella also did the fine illustrations for *Atmosfear*). As a text for reading aloud, *Blink* presents an interesting possibility for three readers, one reading the world as seen by the left eye, another the right, and a third the commentary.

The dinner party is an outrageously repulsive feast; it may prove too much so for delicate adult sensibilities, but hardier children relish being "grossed out" (as one commented) by this fantasy where all the rules of etiquette and nutrition are broken.

the soup was
made of
things alive
with eyes that
opened very
wide the moment
that you took
a sip
and then
they'd bite
you on the lip

Maureen Paxton's surrealist pictures, reminiscent of the animated scenes in *Monty Python*, are appropriately grotesque.

Not surprisingly, O'Huigin is a great success when he reads aloud to groups of children. His fantasy always moves towards absurdity, and the iconoclastic fun of nonsense along with his delight in sound effects gives his children's poetry an immediate appeal. His writing has none of the delicate and subtle effects or the mystery of the best poetry of, say, Walter de la Mare or David McCord. Like the children's verse of Dennis Lee, however, it helps to awaken, or preserve, in its hearers a sense of the fun of language, the richness of words, the arbitrariness of linguistic rules, and the sheer pleasure to be had from a poem.

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