"Once upon a time: Canadian children's picture book illustration"

Judith Saltman

Résumé: *Dans cet article, Judith Saltman retourne aux origines de l'illustration en Grande-Bretagne et aux Etats-Unis. Elle s'attache ensuite à décrire pour nous l'histoire de l'illustration au Canada anglais jusqu'à ses développements récents chez des illustrateurs comme William Kurelek, Laszlo Gel, Ken Nutt, Kim La Fave et bien d'autres.*

"...and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" (Lewis Carroll, Alice's adventures in Wonderland, Macmillan, 1865, pp. 1-2)

The Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition *Once upon a time: Canadian children's book illustration*, held from May to July 1988, was a landmark in the development of Canadian children's literature, particularly the picture book. Never before has a major art gallery given recognition to the state of the art in Canadian picture book illustration. This exhibition is a celebratory signal to book and art lovers that Canadian children's picture books have achieved a level of excellence and excitement of an international calibre.

The *Once upon a time* exhibition provided a forum for the original artwork of twenty-six contemporary illustrators. It also offered, in the valuable display of early and rare children's books, a context and background for understanding the historical development of international children's book illustration from the seventeenth century to the evolution of the Canadian picture book. For our contemporary illustrators do not stand alone; their art is the direct descendant of a centuries-old tradition of book illustration.

The following article attempts to furnish a historical and critical context for the achievements of our illustrators. It will analyze the picture book as an art form; give an overview of the historical development of children's book illustration; offer a brief outline of Canadian children's picture-book publishing; and assess the achievements of the twenty-six illustrators in the exhibit and their contributions to the genre. These are considerable and cause for celebration.

The tradition of book illustration is rooted in the early forms of picture-writing. From pictographs and hieroglyphics, it continues through the illuminated manuscripts to the first printed books and finally to contemporary

children's picture books. In this tradition, visual images are powerful symbols imbued with aesthetic, informational, and narrative meaning.

The picture book is the newest member of the family of illustrated books, and the distinction between picture books and illustrated books is a fine one. In general, what distinguishes an illustrated book is that the pictures are clearly subordinate to the text. In a picture book, however, the pictures and text are indissolubly united so that neither can stand without the other; art and text are wedded into an indivisible whole.

A close cousin of the picture book is the picture storybook which is differentiated from the former by a longer text and a less integrated relationship between pictures and words.

In all categories, the function of the pictures is both narrative and aesthetic. The visual elements elaborate on, extend, or clarify the words they are designed to accompany. Aesthetic appeal and textual honesty are extremely important, but they must strike a critical balance with the purpose of the book. The illustrator must sympathetically interpret the plot, theme, or concept and visually create character and setting, atmosphere and action.

Picture books provide the foundation for a child's visual and imaginative education. They are an introduction to art and literature. They teach sensitivity to line and an awareness of colour, form, and design. Children do not see illustrations in books as a gallery of isolated pictures but as a story communicated through an integration of words and pictures.

Following the tradition of pictorial decoration in bestiaries and other medieval illuminated manuscripts, the first printers of the fifteenth century were quick to add crude, simple illustrations carved in wood blocks. Lively woodcuts adorned Caxton's edition of *Aesop's fables* and what is considered the first picture book designed for children: Bishop Comenius's seventeenth century educational primer, *Orbis sensualium pictus, or The visible world*. The instructional value and aesthetic child-appeal of illustrations continued to be recognized in the use of crude woodcuts to embellish the popular street literature of chapbooks. Visual imagery was pursued by John Newbery, the mid-eighteenth century pioneer publisher of children's books, who advertised that his little books were "adorned with cuts."

The art of wood block engraving was refined in the eighteenth century through the pastoral genius of Thomas Bewick. From the seventeenth century, woodcuts were challenged by engravings on copper or steel plates which permitted an elaboration of detail. Lithography, used to reproduce Edward Lear's antic drawings, was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. Other significant Victorian illustrators who contributed to children's books included William Mulready, George Cruikshank, and John Tenniel. Photographic reproduction of pictures on metal plates eventually extended the possibilities of the art.

The engraver and printer, as well as the illustrator, were very important

figures in the development of book illustration. One of these was the engraver-printer Edmund Evans, who perfected a process of colour printing from wood blocks in 1856, a tremendous advance on the hand tinting and crude chromolithography of the early nineteenth century. Evans guided three artists considered to be the founders of the picture book tradition: Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, and Kate Greenaway. This triumvirate revolutionized the "toybooks" or picture books of the day. Caldecott is noted for his masterful, energetic line and imaginative extension of the textual meaning; Crane for his strong sense of overall book design, brilliant colouration, and decorative elegance; and Greenaway for her expressive delicacy of style and aura of childlike grace.

The early twentieth century saw original picture book creators such as the miniaturist Beatrix Potter and the genial L. Leslie Brooke develop the genre with their signature styles. Paralleling the development of the picture book, the illustrated book for children entered a golden age of illustration with handsome gift books created with extravagant colour, lavish bindings, tipped-in plates, and quality paper. Belonging to this period are Arthur Rackham's eerie fairy tale world, Edmund Dulac's Persian-influenced opulence and detail, and Kay Nielsen's art nouveau-ish stylized imagery.

Children's book illustration in the United States was shaped from the late nineteenth century by Howard Pyle, a masterful artist and outstanding teacher. His superb draughtsmanship and overall integration of art and text influenced his pupils, among whom were N.C. Wyeth, Maxfield Parrish, and Jessie Willcox Smith.

Following World War 1, the major growth in the picture book took place in the United States rather than in Britain, as a stream of artists from Europe brought new techniques and modes of illustration to the country, including European folk art traditions and a more sophisticated sense of book design. Americans such as Wanda Gag and Robert McCloskey created early classics. However, British artists, such as Ernest Shepard and Edward Ardizzone, kept the British tradition alive.

Following a dimming of energy and production during the Second World War, the picture book has flourished again since 1945, expanding its range and scope through technical advances such as offset-lithography which has enabled visual effects impossible in earlier years. Artists of the 1950s, such as Marcia Brown, experimented with a growing range of styles and idioms, adapting technique to meet the tone of an individual text. These styles reflected the visual trends of the day, not only the traditional art styles, from impressionism to abstraction, but also commercial styles such as advertising art and poster design.

The economic stability of the 1960s and the early 1970s supported the continued growth of illustration through the refinement of printing technology and the artists' ongoing experimentation with a wide variety of styles and tech-

niques. Those artists who held to the balance of art and text included notable illustrators who also wrote their own texts with real sympathy for children – such masters as Maurice Sendak, Ezra Jack Keats, Charles Keeping, and John Burningham.

Lately there has been a new wave of picture books of such sophistication in social and political commentary, symbolic allusion, subtle wit, and graphic play as to demand a new audience of older children, teenagers, and adults. Complex picture books by Raymond Briggs and Chris Van Allsburg are representative of those who have helped to extend the traditional picture book genre. Simultaneously, an explosion in board books for babies and wordless picture books has brought quality artists into prominence in these sub-genres of the picture book that were heretofore considered as more toys than books. Today's picture books from all countries offer a marvelous richness and wealth of visual experience to children.

A tradition of book illustration was strikingly absent in the field of early Canadian children's books. Chiefly for economic reasons, this area of book production has been exceedingly slow to develop and, until the late 1960s, remained relatively conservative and undistinguished. The difficulties besetting the publishing industry in Canada profoundly affected the development of Canadian children's literature, not only the illustrated book and the picture book. Most of the problems still apply today. The book buying market for Canadian children's books is an audience scattered across a vast distance and divided by language; Canada's immense territory also makes book distribution, promotion, and publicity erratic and expensive. Scant reviewing coverage is given to Canadian children's books, and there is heavy competition from Britain and the United States. There are few children's book editors to supply editorial guidance and art direction. Since there are no economies of scale in Canadian publishing to lower the cost per book, manufacturing costs (particularly for capital intensive picture books) are very high.

Since the early 1970s, there has been a change in this gloomy atmosphere. Growth has been fostered by rising Canadian nationalism, the emergence of small presses solely committed to publishing for children, growth in independent children's book stores, and increased government subsidies to publishers. There have also been improvements in attention from the media, the number and prestige of national literary awards, support from institutional buying, and marketing and promotion, especially on the international scene. Parents and other concerned adults have come to realize that a sense of Canada's heritage and identity can be nurtured if children encounter, from their first years, their own personal world in books, validated by the power of the imagination, giving them an awareness of Canada's physical and emotional geography and history.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, there were a small number of quality illustrated children's books published in Canada. Clare Bice, in books such as

Jory's Cove, reflected the Maritimes in representational black-and-white sketches. Leo Rampen's bold drawings for James Reaney's *The boy with an R in his hand* suggest the graphic strength of woodcuts. Donald Grant's line drawings for Dorothy Reid's *Tales of Nanabozho* capture the oral storytelling atmosphere of these indigenous tales. But it was James Houston's illustrations for his own retelling of an Inuit legend in *The white archer* which raised the level of Canadian book illustration to an international stature. His wax crayon drawings have a sculptural Inuit quality reminiscent of soapstone carving which perfectly complements the text. And Douglas Tait's pen and ink line drawings for Christie Harris's retellings of West Coast Indian legends have a detailed exactitude and spiritual energy. Through the 1960s and 1970s, native illustrators (both Indian and Inuit) brought a different, indigenous perspective and stylized imagery to their own legends. George Clutesi's striking drawings for *Son of Raven, Son of Deer* offer an early example of the trend.

A major event occurred in 1968 when the first Canadian children's book with full four-colour illustration was published to great critical acclaim. *The wind has wings: poems from Canada*, (edited by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson), illustrated in tactile collage and radiant colour by Elizabeth Cleaver, was a landmark book which heralded a breakthrough in illustrative art.

The picture book was even slower to develop than the illustrated book. Today, however, it is the fastest growing, most aggressively marketed, and most vital sector of the industry in Canada. Picture books appeared only sporadically in the 1930s. R.K. Gordon's *A Canadian child's ABC* had severely plain black ink illustrations by Thoreau Macdonald. What may be our first picture book – *An illustrated comic alphabet* – drawn and lettered by an Englishwoman, Amelia Frances Howard Gibbon, in 1859, probably for the teaching of her little scholars in Sarnia, was not published until 1966. It is a charming period piece and the first award for book illustration in Canada bears the name of its illustrator. The occasional high-quality picture book was published by Oxford University Press in the 1960s, focusing on the Canadian experience, such as the first of William Toye's and Elizabeth Cleaver's collaborative series of single illustrated Indian legends, *The mountain goats of Temlaham* and *How summer came to Canada*.

The years from the mid 1970s until the late 1980s saw a transformation in the publishing of Canadian picture books, partly as a result of the use of Hong Kong colour printing which was cheaper than that in Canada. There was also an explosion in the range of visual style, energy of expression, and diversity of content and format. This change had its roots in the earlier ground-breaking work of a few picture book creators: Elizabeth Cleaver, Ann Blades, Laszlo Gal, and Frank Newfeld, who were harbingers of the successes of the 1970s and 1980s.

The paucity of Canadian picture books was somewhat alleviated in the early

seventies by the appearance of a group of longer picture storybooks addressing themes of history and autobiography for young readers beyond pre-school age. One of the best was *Cartier discovers the St. Lawrence*, written by William Toye, which evokes, through Laszlo Gal's handsome illustrations, the expanses of landscape and suspenseful discovery of a new world. An important innovation in picture book publishing has been a series of autobiographical accounts of childhood experiences in the Canadian multicultural mosaic; these memoirs document the regional cultures arising out of a particular place, time, and ethnic group. The texts are extended emotionally through pictorial storytelling in such works as Shizuye Takashima's reminiscences and water-colour washes of Japanese Canadian internment during the Second World War, *A child in prison camp*, and William Kurelek's memoirs of the Ukrainian-Canadian depression era, *A prairie boy's winter*.

Many of this group of books came from the innovative Montreal publishing house, Tundra Books, which pioneered picture books as works of art, establishing high standards and winning numerous awards. Ann Blades's *Mary of Mile 18* was the first full-colour picture book to be published by Tundra Books. Tundra has since commissioned respected gallery artists, such as William Kurelek, Ted Harrison, Lindee Climo, Warabe Aska, and Richard Pelham (often artists who work in a consciously primitive, naive art style or magic realist style) to illustrate for children. The resulting picture books are more like a framed sequence of formal works of fine art than narrative illustration. Many of these follow the trend in European picture books aesthetics in which the illustrations are considered more important than, or separate from, the text. The books often become adult collectors' pieces as works of art; they also have a uniquely home grown flavour, traversing the diverse regions and multicultural identities of Canada, as does Stéphane Poulin's loveletter to Montreal, *Can you catch Josephine*?

Another group of picture books published by originally alternative presses such as Annick Press and Kids Can Press is more child-oriented in philosophy, content, and style, concentrating on works for pre-schoolers and younger school-aged children. Illustrators often project a childlike sensibility, as in the works of cartoon-style artists Michael Martchenko and Robin Baird Lewis. By contrast to the Tundra artists, these illustrators fall more into the classic British and North American tradition of the illustrator as narrative artist working closely in tandem with the text to extend the story. Humourists such as the cartoonists John Bianchi, Maryann Kovalski, Kim La Fave, and Catharine O'Neill fall into this category, as do more experimental stylists such as Ian Wallace and Ken Nutt.

From the late 1960s to 1980s, a wave of immigration brought new artists and illustrators, some with established reputations and an international perspective, to the Canadian picture book field. Laszlo Gal, who arrived in Canada from Hungary in 1956, was a harbinger of this trend. Individuals who have

enriched the Canadian picture book genre include Ted Harrison and Richard Pelham from the United Kingdom, Warabe Aska from Japan, Victor Gad from Poland, Philippe Béha from France, and Maryann Kovalski, Lindee Climo, John Bianchi, and Dayal Kaur Khalsa from the United States. A few of these illustrators work in styles reflecting their countries of origin, and all have added to the sophistication and maturation of the picture book in Canada.

Canadian publishers in the last decade have begun vigorously marketing and promoting Canadian picture books abroad, selling foreign rights and arranging co-publication at international book fairs such as Bologna and Frankfurt. The 1980s has also been an active time for translation and publication between English-and French-Canadian publishing houses such as James Lorimer and Editions Ovale. Distinguished talents from Quebec who have left their mark on the Canadian picture book and whose works are also available in English include Philippe Béha, Marie-Louise Gay, Stéphane Poulin, and Michèle Lemieux.

Canadian picture book publishing has increased in variety and quality in recent years; important changes in content and format as well as in style have occurred. A diversity of books exist designed for children's different developmental stages, interests, and needs. There has been a proliferation of single illustrated folktales, native legends, songs, and poems; of books for babies and toddlers; of concept books such as alphabet and counting books; and of bilingual books and translations. In content, there has been an increase in stories that focus on aspects of social urban realism, immigration, multiculturalism, regionalism, and contemporary native life. Picture books that offer texts of imaginative fantasy, such as those published by Groundwood Books, or of social realism, by Annick Press and The Women's Press, are also present in increasing numbers.

Contemporary Canadian picture books also contain an impressive range of illustrative styles, techniques, and media to shape the content of the texts. Although decidedly individual in vision and drawn from diverse backgrounds of gallery and commercial art, the artists nonetheless are not wholly resistant to classification. They reflect certain shared visual sensibilities and stylistic traditions. It is possible to group the foremost illustrators by style under such categories as "naive primitivism" "magic realism," "surrealism," "expressionism," "romanticism," "folk art," and "cartoon art." These are loose demarcations with crossovers of individual illustrators eclectically incorporating elements from many different styles.

A handful of illustrators may be categorized as primarily stylists who use a specific medium as a vehicle for the transmission of story and idea. Elizabeth Cleaver, Karen Patkau, and Barbara Reid use media which are familiar to children from their daily lives: collage and plasticine.

Elizabeth Cleaver was Canada's pioneer picture book illustrator and, before her death in 1985, was internationally recognized as a major artist. She

developed an unmistakable style with her striking sense of design, distinctive collage technique, and passion for blazing colour and rich texture. Cleaver's fascination with the layered matter of mythology and archetypal imagery led her to illustrate a series of native legends simply retold by William Toye. The dreamlike quality of many of the oral tales of native peoples, originally multiform and loosely structured, make them appropriate to the graphic abstraction of Cleaver's collage shapes. Her use of found objects from nature also provides a literal context, adding a flavour of place and custom. In such works as *The mountain goats of Temlaham* and *The loon's necklace* an adroit sense of play makes the pictures and story more comprehensible to children by the use of cut-out silhouettes and surprising configurations of collage, made from coloured monoprints (textured papers), torn and cut and integrated with linoprints. Cleaver also introduced a spontaneous joy into her books by including real objects such as a pearl, fur, lace, or articles from nature such as cedar and birch bark. In *ABC*, she united her interest in typographical design and found art and moved away from the still, stylized grace and narrative flow of her early mythological pictures to a childlike rendering of rainbow-brilliant alphabet letters and objects.

Karen Patkau also works with the collage technique. Her art is less stylized than that of Cleaver, more representational and three-dimensional, close to the spirit of children's play in cutting and pasting paper and fabric to create images. In her pictures for *Ringtail*, with verses by Patricia Sillers, Patkau boldly dramatizes Toronto's racoon and ravine life, providing a window on nature radiant with energy and light.

Barbara Reid uses plasticine as her medium of expression. A highly unconventional medium in children's picture books, it captures with a unique originality and freshness the child's sensuous response to the physical world. As tactile and textured as Cleaver's and Patkau's collages, the plasticine provides a broader scope for humour in pictures which convey a subtle wit, a talent for caricature and droll situational vignettes. The dense colours, intricate detail and texture, and vital energy of the images in *Have you seen birds?*, with verses by Joanne Oppenheim, give movement to a vista of bird life set against a shifting backdrop of landscape, season, and perspective.

Other illustrators, when approaching legend and folklore, work in a way that is dramatically different from that established by Cleaver. Such illustrators as Laszlo Gal, Robin Muller, and Kim La Fave use a more traditional, representational style and warmer, intimate romanticism to give shape to the stories of European folklore and early Canadian pioneer tall tales. These illustrators of European-influenced folklore are working in the style of romanticism, a tradition that eclectically evokes the visual retelling of folk and fairy tale from the golden age of children's book illustration. Their art is influenced by such turn-of-the-century illustrators as Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and Kay Nielsen.

Laszlo Gal's particular talent found its niche in the single illustrated folktale. He reinterprets classic European folktales in a style representational in detail and formality. His images are grave and romantic, with sculptural figures, delicate, pastel tones, and striking compositions decoratively framed. He has illustrated, among others, Margaret Crawford Maloney's version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The little mermaid*. Gal's paintings in gouache, watercolour, and pencil crayon do not extend the story in the manner of pure picture book illustration. His art belongs, rather, to the tradition of lavish book illustration; the theatrical pictures heighten the drama and poignancy of this serious, even sombre, story with visual vignettes, often formally framed, that stand separate from the text, offering windows into a world of faerie where monumental figures are forever in frozen, graceful gestures.

Another illustrator who has treated the European folktale from a more stylized viewpoint is Robin Muller. His pencil-crayon and ink illustrations for *The sorcerer's apprentice* reveal a fine draughtsmanship in the crisp clarity of the images and his use of irregular compositions conveys a heightened, potent atmosphere. Muller's style incorporates elements of bold design, such as dramatic closeups and blended images, that give the pictures a cinematic flavour.

A number of illustrators of the folktale have drawn on Canadian rather than European culture for inspiration and text. There is a pioneer subject matter and transmuted old-world cultural imagery in Kim La Fave's illustrations for *The mare's egg: A new world folk tale*, retold by Carole Spray, which is a noodlehead tale of a pioneer simpleton. La Fave's satirical oil paintings and variety of design are reminiscent of Arthur Rackham's drollery and exquisite draughtsmanship. The unusual perspectives and panel vignettes accentuate the fact that this is a contemporary illustrator alluding to the classic world of folk illustration.

Magic realism is another style that can be seen in the works of Warabe Aska, Ian Wallace, Ken Nutt, Richard Pelham, Ted Harrison, and Lindee Climo. Warabe Aska may be the purest magic realist in this loose category of illustrators. *Who hides in the park* is a celebration of a pastoral refuge at the heart of a large city: Vancouver's Stanley Park. Aska's sophisticated oil paintings have a magic-realist or surrealist dimension, steeped as they are in the mythical aura of native Indian images. Naively styled figures of children drawn from the cultural mosaic of Canada fill the foreground in scenes of play against West Coast forest and seashore. But these ordinary human activities are bathed in an effulgent, eerily radiant light; the sky and forest are Esher-like playgrounds of half-hidden animals and mythic images.

The colouration of Aska's pictures is paralleled in the artwork of Ian Wallace's *Morgan the magnificent*. Haunting tones of purple iridescence convey the story's romantic, fantastical mood. Wallace's picture in watercolour, pen and ink, and pencil crayon suggest a representational realism, but the magic edge of eerie colour, dramatic manipulation of scale and perspective, and

frozen, somnambulistic figures propel the story into a surreal dimension as a small girl lives out her fantasy of being a high-wire artist.

Whereas the surrealism in Wallace's illustrations tends to heighten the realism of the story by contrasting it with an inner imaginative resonance, Ken Nutt's sculptural black and white graphite drawings work in the opposite direction. *Zoom away* (a quest fantasy like its predecessor, *Zoom at sea*) is grounded in reality by the restrained firmness of down to earth, matter of fact pencil drawings. Unlike the magic realism of Aska and Wallace, Nutt's is a subtle magic; he does not exploit the emotional power of colour or exaggerate perspective and figure, but juxtaposes ordinary images with the fabulous and supernatural, both rendered with the same meticulous detail. Tim Wynne-Jones's text of a cat's quest for the North Pole and the concept of an infinite house with rooms that expand into an endless space of imaginative freedom require concrete illustrations in representational surface detail to make the story believable and anchor the fantasy in reality.

Nutt's wit and sly details of characterization and behaviour have a parallel in the satirical magic realism of another pencil artist, Richard Pelham. Both illustrators reflect the European tradition of academic drawing; both use black and white images, rather than colour; and both express a content that touches on political and social satire. Nutt's drawings are more sculptural than those of Pelham, which are flat, energetic images that also convey a state of mystery. Pelham provides for Joan Finnigan's *Look! the land is growing giants: A very Canadian legend* whimsical images of Joseph Montferrand, the giant lumberjack, and a visual sense of history, regional place, and social milieu for this tall tale from the Ottawa Valley. Pelham's drawings are stylized and exaggerated; his line is delicate, sketchy, and wiry. There is a touch of magic realism in the floating spatial perspectives.

Ted Harrison's paintings in acrylic of the Yukon give a form of unearthly otherness to the single illustrated edition of the classic Canadian mock-epic poem, *The cremation of Sam McGee* by Robert W. Service. The poem's ironic melodrama is enacted against a wild Arctic background of psychedelic shapes and neon colours. The romance of the north is conveyed through piercing, vertiginous streaks of unnaturally pure colour which present the bleak landscape and endless sky, turning the north into an abstract, magical state of mind as much as a realistic place. The influence of commercial art and poster design, as well as folk art, is evident in the swirling, curvilinear style of heavy outlines surrounding flat shapes of figures and buildings like pieces of stained glass.

This curvilinear folk quality is also evident in the art of Lindee Climo, whose oil paintings for *Chester's barn* possess a Canadian folk spirit. A variety of shapes demonstrates Climo's dramatic sense of design, and the curvilinear contour lines of her images strongly recall folk carving. The Prince Edward Island setting of an old traditional farm with its daily round of animal husban-

dry is given an emotional sense of place as strong as that of Harrison's Yukon. Magic realism is evident in the mythic power of the animal portraits; these beasts have radiant and compelling spirits while the farmer is faceless and anonymous.

There is also a touch of naivete in Climo's work which links her to the next category of naive art or primitivism. The first Canadian illustrator to gain recognition for her style as a naive primitivist was Ann Blades. She does not consciously use elements of folk or primitive art, but her soft watercolours show the poignant delicacy of a childlike, naive style in tentative draughtsmanship, simplified compositions in floating space, intuitive colour sense, and use of repetitive decorative details to fill the page. Blade's illustrations are absolutely natural and ingenuous, looking out to the physical world with a gentle love and warmth. In her picture storybook, *Mary of Mile 18*, which chronicles the northern life of a British Columbia Mennonite child, Blades was one of the first Canadian author-illustrators to explore the theme of the multicultural experience as foreground and the power of a recognizable Canadian landscape as background. In *Ida and the wool smugglers*, by Sue Ann Alderson, Blades's sturdy child figures inhabit an evocative, poetic landscape. The watercolours are carefully controlled, and the clear, luminous colour washes give the story of a little girl's rescue of sheep from smugglers a quality of heroism and magical green mystery appropriate to the Gulf Island setting.

A more sophisticated primitivist is William Kurelek, whose international reputation as a gallery artist was extended with the acclaim he received as an illustrator of picture storybooks, such as *A prairie boy's winter* and *A northern Nativity*. In *A prairie boy's winter*, Kurelek's visual memories of a Ukrainian-Canadian childhood spent on a Manitoba dairy farm in the 1930s form a set of striking paintings in coloured pencil and coloured ink loosely linked by a straightforward text. There is a glowing nostalgia in the naively styled illustrations of the boy William against the changing seasonal backdrop of farm chores, children's games, and animal life dwarfed by the endless prairie and sky. Overpowering all other elements in the art and text is the sense of place – the farms of Manitoba – and of human life in relation to the land and climate.

In *A northern Nativity*, Kurelek moves from memoir to dream and legend. He sets one of the most resonant of narratives, the Nativity, against a kaleidoscope of Canadian scenes. Based on a series of childhood dreams, the paintings place the Nativity in a social and political context – the depression era of Kurelek's childhood – and relocate it in a cinematic journey across the country. The holy family, depicted as representing all Canadians, is placed in settings from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to Ottawa, and appears in many changing cultural identities, including Inuit, Black, and Indian.

While Kurelek's images of child activities and games recall the paintings of Breugel, Dayal Kaur Khalsa's gouache and coloured pencil artwork in *I want*

a dog uses more eclectic and direct allusions to historical art styles and specific master works, from Seurat's "A Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte" to the photorealism of the late 1970s. As a sophisticated, satirical artist, Khalsa draws on such elements of naive art as flat, doll-like figures, intensely brilliant colour, and pages massed with intricate detail in her visual rendition of a little girl's ingenious attempts to persuade her parents to give her a dog.

Several illustrators from Quebec share elements of naive primitivism: Stéphane Poulin, Michèle Lemieux, and Philippe Béha. Stéphane Poulin's *Can you catch Josephine?* celebrates the inner city, multicultural life of East Montreal with the joy of a child's playful journey of discovery. Clean, humorous, and crisply rendered oil paintings offer scenes of school and street in warm rich colours which capture the vibrant romance of the neighbourhood. The naively distorted faces and figures of Poulin's child characters make them funny, endearing, and unforgettable.

Michèle Lemieux, in her animal fable, *What is that noise?*, uses a more delicate, refined style of naive primitivism with touches of cartoon draughtsman ship in the droll figures. The sketchy softness of the hazy water colours and coloured pencil images conveys an impressionistic, textural quality familiar from the picture books of Europe where Lemieux has lived and worked.

Philippe Béha combines naive primitivism with the spirit of the next group of cartoon illustrators in strong line drawings rich in zesty caricature, as in his *Where is my dummy?* and *Bad day.*

Another group of illustrators use a cartoon style and are often visual narrators and storytellers, humourists in contrast to the more restrained, magic realist or romantic artists. The natural exaggeration and expressive distortion of cartoon art lend a lightness of spirit and playful incongruity to the pictures. Many of these illustrators are strong line artists. The works of Philippe Béha, Robin Baird Lewis, Michael Martchenko, Catharine O'Neill, John Bianchi, Maryann Kovalski, and Kim La Fave all imply in different ways the light wit and freedom of the quick sketch rather than the finished painting. Victor Gad and Marie-Louise Gay, on the other hand, are more surreal, even shocking, in their cartoon art.

Vivacity and charm imbue Philippe Béha's artwork. He has (in the *Tot-books* series written by Sylvie Assathiany and Louise Pelletier) illustrated several board books for babies and toddlers. These simple stories or vignettes of twelve to sixteen lines are designed as child-rearing aids, but the tone is not didactic. The cartoon humour and endearing visual characterization of the small animals in *Where is my dummy?*, and *Bad day* give a domestic warmth and the naive quality of the flat figures, in coloured ink with heavy black outlines, provides a special charm.

Beyond board-books for toddlers, some picture books for the very young focus with simplicity and clarity on the minutiae of everyday experiences and

small, domestic dramas of young pre-schoolers. In Robin Baird Lewis's casual and minimalist cartoon sketches for Kathy Stinson's *Red is best* (part of the *Annick Toddler Series*) an atmosphere of emotional reassurance links with a domestic imagery like Béha. The story of a little girl's obsessive love for the colour red is a perfect balance of art and text. The ingenuous pen and ink line drawings with acetate overlays capture the pre-school child's energy; while splashes of red and bright red endpapers provide graphic unity and transmit the child's emotional attachment to the colour.

The more sophisticated cartoon art images of Michael Martchenko are insouciant watercolour and pencil sketches, a light-hearted complement to Allen Morgan's tongue-in-cheek dream fantasy, *Matthew and the midnight money van*. The cartoon pictures have a spontaneous quality appropriate to the gentle satire and supreme silliness of the text. With its loose, exuberant line and free application of colour, its witty detail and touches of caricature, the illustrative work is influenced by comic-book art and animation. Against a contemporary urban backdrop, the child figure is drawn as modern: rumpled and spunky, dressed in cowboy boots and a baseball cap. Morgan's pop-cartoon style parallels the content of the pictures which reflect, in the attention to such details as the punk pigeons, a fascination with contemporary social images and a wry delight in political and social satire.

The cartoonist's propensity for social satire is evident also in Catharine O'Neill's pen and ink and pencil illustrations for *Mrs. Dunphy's Dog*. This fable of a reading dog who graduates from tabloids to classics is rich with visual humour and cosy domestic detail. The droll text is extended through the whimsical drawings which are marked by a lively, curvilinear line and impressionist dabblings of warm colour.

Another animal fable with canine protagonists is *Brenda and Edward*, written and illustrated by Maryann Kovalski. Like O'Neill's sketches, Kovalski's loose cartoon images parody and caricature the human world from a dog's perspective. Her gentle humour pervades this tale as the anthropomorphized dogs love and lose each other, only to be reunited in their old age. The unfinished sketchiness and pastel tones of the gouache and watercolour drawings add to the tale's delicate blend of sentiment and understated humour. Interesting shifts from aerial perspectives to dog's-eye views signify the powerlessness of an animal in a human world.

The cartoonist's quick insight into the foibles of character and behaviour that marks Kovalski and O'Neill is also evident in John Bianchi's artwork for Helen Levchuk's *The Dingles*. Bianchi's absurdist and exaggerated drawings of a nonsensical woman and her comical cats recall the zany, wild images of the classic British nonsense artist Edward Lear. Sketchy watercolours sparkle with energy and movement as the loose, febrile line chronicles a madcap escapade.

In their cartoon art, Victor Gad and Marie-Louise Gay demonstrate a

harsher, more provocative, and cutting satire than do the quieter wits of the gentle cartoon humourists. Both Gad and Gay have illustrated poetry: Gad the collection of linked poems, *Mischief city*, by Tim Wynne-Jones and Gay the single-illustrated poem *Lizzy's lion* by Dennis Lee. The concentrated form of poetry lends itself well to the classic extension of text in picture book illustration.

Lizzy's lion is a mock cautionary tale in verse in the rather black-humoured poetic tradition of Heinrich Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter* and Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary tales for children*. Marie-Louise Gay's expressionistic cartoons in pencil, watercolour, and dyes on gesso echo the poem's spirit. She combines exaggerated caricature and outlandish grotesquerie in the tradition of sophisticated satirical cartoon art. Gay's decidedly non-naturalistic, zany images, such as the watch-dog lion devouring a wicked robber, tend to distance the reader from the literary violence.

Both Gay and Gad combine cartoon art with an intense, emotional expressionism to create images distorted in proportion and perspective. Their characters are bizarre, living in the realm of imagination and psychological power. Both artists use the technique of framing as a reminder of the dramatic formality of viewing works of art. Gay overflows her frames, breaking borders and stretching character and action into flight. Gad's pictures bleed to the edge of the page, but elements of set design – backdrops, flats, props, even empty audience seats – loosely frame the images as a sequence of theatrical vignettes. This emphasizes the conundrum of reality and illusion in the text and evokes the sense of a staged drama appropriate to the cycle of poems – originally a play – about a boy's home and fantasy life.

Gad is a striking draughtsman in his gouache and coloured ink illustrations. His iconoclastic use of shocking colour as an expressive and emotional vehicle rather than as representational reality align him with the modern romantics. Grotesque imagery, visual distortion, and paradox – as in his many-mouthed faces – push the artwork into the realm of surrealism. This symbolism and the narrative content also reflect a satirical commentary on the political and social realities of contemporary life, especially of the family unit.

Returning to a gentler, more romantic cartoon tradition, Kim La Fave's soft watercolour illustrations for *Goldie and the sea*, written by Judith Saltman, establish a link across time with the first picture-book illustrator, the nineteenth century Randolph Caldecott. A visual storyteller, La Fave extends the fable of a girl-artist's quest for the sea into the realm of tender humour and poignant reflection through the delicacy and whimsy of his sketchy drawings. Choreographic, the pictures dance across the pages, transmitting emotion through the vital line and character through the quick impressionistic portrayal of Goldie and her two animal friends. Intimate details of home and journey set the universal story in a very real world.

Canadian picture books came of age through the 1980s, acquiring a large body of fine titles, talented illustrators, and memorable images. Contemporary Canadian picture book artists use a variety of styles, techniques, and mediums to explore themes, concepts, and ideas which range from the elegantly simple to the subtle and complex, from the universal to the particularly Canadian. Certain illustrators now adapt international trends in style and content to the Canadian experience and explore the particular sensibility of home with integrity of vision and personal, signature styles. In Canadian picture books the illustrations often extend the text to evoke and depict a Canadian sensibility beyond even what may be conveyed in the most complex of novels. In visual and verbal absorption, children can experience through these books the concrete sense of place and the less tangible sense of meaning of a specific culture. They also communicate directly with the experiences and emotional realities of many original and significant visual artists.

NOTES

1 Permission is acknowledged for publication of some of this material which originally appeared (in a different form) in Saltman, Judith, *Modern Canadian children's books* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) and *The Riverside anthology of children's literature*, 6th ed, edited by Judith Saltman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

Judith Saltman, *who is in the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia, last year published a major critical study of contemporary Canadian children's literature:* Modern Canadian children's books *(Oxford Press).*