Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

PICTURE AND POEM: HAPPY MARRIAGE? SUCCESSFUL RAPE?

If I were a cat I would sit in a tree, Ebbitt Cutler. Illus. Rist Arnold. Tundra, 1985. 24 pp. $7.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-177-1; **Alligator pie**, Dennis Lee. Illus. Frank Newfeld. MacMillian, 1974, reissued 1987. 64 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-7715-95622-2; **I said to Sam**, Gwen Molnar. Illus. Carlos Freire. Scholastic-TAB, 1987. 48 pp. $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71367-1; **Annabel Lee**, Edgar Allan Poe. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Tundra Books, 1987. 24 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-200-X; **Ringtail**, Patricia Sillers. Illus. Karen Patkau. Oxford University Press, 1987. Unpag. $12.50 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540585-4; **A winter's yarn**, Kathleen Cook Waldron. Illus. Deborah Turney Zagwyn. Red Deer College Press, 1986. 40 pp. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-027-X.

The subject of the marriage of visuals and text in a picture book is almost certainly more complex than is generally supposed. Experienced readers often sense that the artist has achieved a perfect blend, and we even note sometimes that one painter may do very well with another person's text. There are other times when reviewers feel that the marriage is a bad one, even a hopeless failure. This may happen in picture books of all kinds, but the problem becomes especially acute when we consider *poetry* presented in a picture book format.

The special problem here results from the "word pictures" that we associate more often with poetry than with prose. The painter deals in visible images; the poet deals in images evoked by words. It is entirely possible for the former to set up a kind of interference to the latter. (The word "painter" is used deliberately in this article to suggest someone artistically equal to, but different from, the poet. While "illustrator" is used conventionally, and sometimes appropriately, the term really implies a secondary role. "Painter" for our purposes refers always to the maker of the visuals regardless of the medium used).

Two unique forms are combined in this kind of book. We might ask ourselves: what is the painter doing to the poem? What is the poet doing to the painting? Is the would-be lover of poetry being cut off from her source of pleasure by a painter? Is something similar happening to the viewer, who wishes to have no verbal interference? Is it ever possible at all to blend two such distinct forms? If it is possible then perhaps the consummation of this

"perfect marriage" results in something quite different from the two partners who first entered into the union: the creation of an art form quite different from either of its parents--poetic *or* painted. Yet the inevitable consequence is that one parent is shifted into the background. The aesthetic explanation may lie in the principle of assimilation. This principle has been enunciated by the philosopher, Susanne Langer (1957). In her lifelong study of the interrelationships among the arts she has argued that each form is autonomous. A good poem may well be set to good music, but the end result is a good *song*. In most but not all such cases the words are subordinated to the music. It is always true, Langer insists, that one form, either one, will assimilate, or swallow, the other. Opera (which is a blend of music and drama) is another example, one in which the music assimilates the drama. The finest piece of sculpture in the world, placed as part of a stage setting, would be assimilated by the drama (though it would remain a part of another artistic whole quite different from sculpture).

The marriage of visuals and text in a poetry picture book is a similarly uneven union in which one partner is bound to be subordinate to the other. The best we can hope for is a union so intense that it transcends its respective partners. This is why Marantz insists, "Picture books are not literary works to be read. They are art objects to be experienced" (1977). The poet whose poem finds itself a part of a picture books has to face the fact that the work of art that was a poem now becomes an integral part of a new kind of art. If the elements do not converge well the new work is not artistic, and the poem sinks along with the rest of the vessel. Langer, in a different metaphor, insists, "There are no happy marriages in art--only successful rape" (1986).

In the light of Langer's philosophical work a number of questions come to mind that one might ask about the poetry picture book. Some of these are as follows:

Are there instances in which a poem simply can not "work" without visuals?

Are there instances of poems, long acknowledged to be successful, which are now altered or maybe even in some sense reduced in stature by the addition of visuals?

Would a given poem provide a better aesthetic experience without any visuals at all?

Does it make any difference whether the text and visuals were produced together for each other, or were produced separately in time and place, even by two different people?

Does it matter whether the verse is narrative or lyric or dramatic? Does nonsense verse of fantasy somehow lend itself more readily to presentation with visuals than do other kinds of verse?

Are any visual media more suited to the poem than others?

How closely should text and visuals correspond? (Does the painter portray visually what the poet portrays verbally? Must the painter "say" everything the poet does?)

What place has the reader's imagination in the transaction (cf. Rosenblatt, 1978) which is negotiated by reader and text/visuals? Will a visual rob the reader of his opportunity to respond imaginatively in his own way?

When we look carefully at poetry picture books these are among the ideas we must consider, the questions we need to struggle with. Marantz, who argues persuasively that picture books are in fact definable as art objects, writes, "Art objects are important because they have the potential for producing a transcendental experience, a state of mind where new and personal meanings can take shape . . . [they] invite repeated visits" (1977). Ultimately the student of the poetry picture book has to decide after informed and thoughtful consideration whether the book invites repeated visits, or is "designed for a single go-through" (Marantz). The six books considered here can be placed at several locations along the continuum that stretches from the once-through to the repeatedly visited.

The range of styles and of intentions in poetry picture books is vast, and it is consequently not easy to consider even six in one article. *Alligator pie,* a book now in its adolescence, is making a reappearance in a new paperback issue. The verse, Canadian nonsense at its best, is as fresh as ever, and could manage very well without visual accompaniment. Frank Newfeld, though, has provided circus bright designs which provide just about the right degree of visual nonsense. The book is really not a poetry picture book so much as it is a collection of illustrated poems. If any assimilation is taking place in this fine book, the poems firmly but gently lead the way.

Such is certainly not the case with *Ringtail.* Karen Patkau's elaborate collages (of cut-out painted paper, torn textured paper, pressed flowers, weeds, moss and ferns, bits of fur and felt and hair, cloth, cardboard, paper towel, even wire screen) entirely dominate the book. Graduations of light and dark successfully convey a sense of passing time as Ringtail rambles through his nocturnal suburban routines. Magenta end papers pick up perfectly the shade of pressed flowers on the cover, an instance of good book design evident all the way through. The text, by Patricia Sillers, is almost totally annihilated by the visuals. One wonders why verse was chosen over prose for this book. Taken on its own the rhymed verse narrates Ringtail's adventures excitingly, but the elaborate double pages of detailed collage call for a more prosaic tale, or even no tale at all. This book comes very close in its narrative art style to what a good wordless picture book can be.

Two books that carry off the marriage of text and visuals very well are *If I were a cat I would sit in a tree,* a counting book with an original twist, and *I said to Sam.* Rist Arnold's great strength is in design. Every leaf, every leop-

ard's spot, every tree's bark is skillfully drawn. Colours are flat, never upstaging the design. Every facing page is framed in a stylized black-on-white design, which is picked up in the numerals that head the left hand pages of text. Large ares of white are wisely provided. The pages of text are not too busy. The eye has a chance to rest. The simple, effective verse provides a balance to the intricate facing designs. Perhaps no book calls out more for an overall design than a counting book, yet not every artist has seen this need. In this book the principle is established that the rhyme needed to complete each page is the number that begins the next. The child reader anticipates, predicts. The book comes full circle to twelve (with a design inspired by the twelfth month) and then moves back to one:

In fact, for a quieter kind of fun,
It might be best to be just ----

What child is going to shout "Thirteen!"? None that I know.

In *I said to Sam* the illustrations in colour are small in relation to the boldly printed text. It is through size and scale that they successfully accompany, never overwhelm, the text. Occasionally, in appropriate places, words are printed in the colour they name. This might seem a little didactic, but when the colours are ones like carnelian, hyacinth and cranberry we can forgive the artist. The very humorous, very rhythmical rhymed verse, is strong, a delight to the ear, and Gwen Molnar clearly knows that unusual words used well are just what children like--flotsam and jetsam, carnelian, ermine, troika--and many more. The book works, as any kindergarten or primary school child would tell you.

How do we know the protagonist is a boy? Well, we don't, but the illustrator thought so, so we have to agree, don't we? Very influential people, these artists, aren't they?

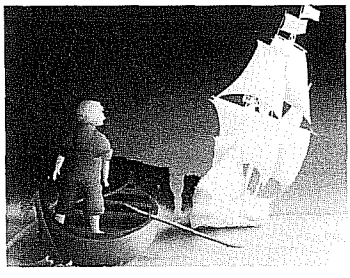
Two poetry picture books in the truest sense of the term (i.e., both are continuous single works) are *Annabel Lee* and *A winter's yarn*. One of them is a great success; the other considerably less so. *A winter's yarn* is a very busy book. It is so busy that it scarcely has time for the reader. Two gifted artists are here brought together in what seems more a contest than a collaboration. The large right hand pages consist of elaborate water colours bleeding off all sides of the page, and the facing pages, which contain the text, are decorated, not, one guesses, by the water colourist, but by the book designer. A fairly complex system, involving frames in a singularly inappropriate powder blue, and large grey initials and page numbers clash with the facing water colours. It does not do a lot to help the text, either, which would be more accessible left alone on a white page.

The narrative poem, written in two line rhyming stanzas, is very long. Rhymed couplets are prone to induce monotony, and that was this reader's

experience. Even a good tale (or yarn, which is a pun on the knitting motif in the book) loses its appeal when the versification is predominant.

The publisher recommends the book for "kindergarten to elementary" but few of the younger ones would have the stamina to read the book. As a read-aloud it might work in short increments, but all of it would be taxing for a reader, perhaps also for the child listener.

A study of fifth graders' responses to poetry picture books (Sheldon 1986) found that in reading the famous Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by woods on a snowy evening," (1923) illustrated by Susan Jeffers (1978) children responded almost exclusively to the pictures, hardly even aware that they were reading a poem. It is thus interesting to see another vintage poem appear in a picture book format. *Annabel Lee* was written by the American, Edgar Allan Poe, in 1849. An earlier generation of high school students commonly read the poem, and now it is available for younger readers (not much younger) with Canadian pictures by a Canadian, Gilles Tibo.



This poetry book is a success. There are a number of reasons. *Annabel Lee* is a narrative poem, very unlike the Frost lyric. The poem also has a strong vein of fantasy; it does not lend itself to literal rendering. Gilles Tibo has provided a delicate running accompaniment ot the poem, one that leaves the mysteries largely to the imagination. The ship that comes is entirely white, the seraphs from Heaven, are they those white gulls? Not only the poem, but also the pictures are shrouded in mystery. Even the children are nearly faceless. They are whoever readers make them. Tibo's technique is airbrush, and the subtleties produced by that difficult process are just right for the poetic mysteries of Poe. The book is a beautiful piece of design, too. The whole is a work of art. It will invite the reader back again and again.

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