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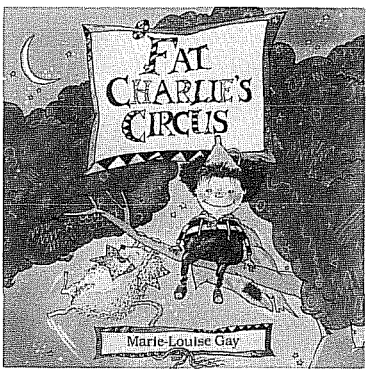
THE FANTASTIC AND THE FAMILIAR IN *FAT CHARLIE'S CIRCUS*

Fat Charlie's circus. Marie-Louise Gay. Illus. author. Stoddart, 1989. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2285-8.



The last time Marie-Louise Gay wrote and illustrated a children's picture book, she walked away with both the Governor General's Award and the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award. She added these coveted prizes to a long and intimidating list that includes the Canada Council Children's Literature Prize, awarded once for her illustration of Dennis Lee's *Lizzy's lion*, and again in the same year, for her creation of the series, *Drôle d'école*. *Fat Charlie's circus*, Gay's latest picture book, is no less deserving. While the narrative is less fantastic than her previous stories, there is enough of self-styled fantasy in Fat Charlie's vision to support the story, and to make it diverting, without the addition of polar bears that emerge from refrigerators or moons that become magical sailing ships.

The narrative mixes the fantastic and the familiar, improbable incidents and realistic dialogue, into a portrait of a round red-head who is transported by his vision of himself as a budding circus performer. Moving steadily through a series of comic mishaps and adventures, the plot follows Fat Charlie as he makes a determined effort to increase his repertoire of circus acts. Tightrope walking on the clothesline, juggling dinner plates, and lion-taming his devoted companion, a hairy gray cat, do not fully test the limits of Charlie's imagination. It is his Daring Diving Act that, he thinks, will squash the cynicism of his family and bring him well-deserved fame. The light-hearted tone of the story alters when Charlie, sitting atop the tallest tree, looks down upon the "tiny speck" of a water-filled glass – his intended landing point – and realizes that he is too scared to make the dive. He is crestfallen and the illustration – a two-page spread showing Fat Charlie dwarfed by the violet expanse of night sky –

heightens his aloneness. His spectators go home to supper, night falls, and Charlie still cannot move. Life is becoming complex. His "rescue" comes eventually, from an unexpected source – his bespectacled grandmother who wears turquoise runners and a look of profound naïvete, she climbs the tree, intending, she claims, to jump with Charlie. That gesture of support is enough to give Charlie the emotional reassurance he needs and the courage to climb down from the tree. The book closes with this eccentric pair practicing their Bicycle Balancing Act, thus sealing our impression that such emotional closeness soothes fears and bolsters dreams. Gay's narrative clearly moves towards insights about the relationship between imagination and reality and, more importantly, about the child's need for uncritical emotional support. And these insights are embedded in the text; like Charlie's grandmother, they are heartwarming and emerge naturally and quietly.

Apart from the thematic interest of the book, much of its lasting appeal derives from characterization and the inventiveness of the illustrations. Except for the opening page, all of the illustrations are full two-page spreads, visually exciting for their intense colours, changes in perspective, and abundance of detail. With these details, Gay suggests the imaginative fullness of Charlie's world and her own appreciation of the importance of setting. She gives impressions of tangible locations, providing minute details that still keep her cartoon-like characters in the foreground at all times, letting them play their roles in appropriate, unmuted settings. The flurries of action and dialogue are reflected in expressionistic drawings that perpetually suggest movement – indeed, that sometimes threaten to escape the page.

This impression is helped by Gay's fondness for the diagonal line and her frequent use of the device of framing, one of her more intriguing experiments with form. Rather than distancing us from the picture enclosed by a frame, the rubbery borders within the larger illustration provide dramatic focus, drawing the reader in to scrutinize its contents. Moreover, the frames can just barely contain their pictures, thus simultaneously echoing Fat Charlie's inability to restrain his imagination, and the story's thematic interest in the imaginative realm's relationship to the outside world. Sometimes the frames suggest the formality of looking at photographs, paintings, or freeze frames. What surrounds the framed picture, then, provides a glimpse into another world (where, among other things, a subplot with impish mice as protagonists is developing), or it suggests the continuity between the two worlds. In either case, the illustrations demand our involvement. Throughout the book, we are asked to focus on the framed event, but to watch what explodes the parameters, to quickly switch our perspective from bird's eye to worm's eye, and to attend to a myriad of details that supply narrative context.

Gay's work is, without question, challenging and innovative. But what is more, *Fat Charlie's circus* has an unusual depth – both in the carefully-

shaded illustrations and the subtlety of the text. While Gay has called this latest book a more "normal" story than her previous ones that featured polar bears and moon ships, she is right to insist that in *Fat Charlie's circus* "there was no inventing of fierce animals or crazy things, but there was the emotion there that was very, very important."

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SECRET GARDENS, INDUSTRIAL PARKS

The refuge. Monica Hughes. Doubleday Canada, 1989. 140 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-385-25219-5.

In a 1986 interview in *Canadian Children's Literature*, Monica Hughes referred to herself as a "technological pastoralist" (*CCL*, 44 (1986) 6-18). This phrase evokes clearly the landscape of her latest novel, *The refuge*, which borrows the motif of "the secret garden" from Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel but relocates it in that paradigmatic modern wasteland, the industrial park.

The refuge is the story of twelve-year-old Barb Coutts whose life has been torn apart by her parents' separation and divorce. Barb must come to terms not only with her father's absence and indifference to her (he is one of Fitzgerald's "careless" people), but with a real decline in social and economic status. Her mother is determined to support herself and her daughter through her freelance journalism but this requires a move from their affluent home in Willow Heights on the southside of Edmonton, to a townhouse complex in the northside, working-class neighbourhood, of Westwood Acres. Hughes – who lives in Edmonton and has written about some of its landmarks in earlier novels like *The ghost dance caper* – makes wonderfully ironic use of the names of such subdivisions. While "Westwood Acres" suggests the rural and the pastoral, the neighbourhood in fact borders and industrial "park" and Barb's new bedroom

> Faced west, with a splendid view of factories and warehouses, built variously of brick and stone, aluminum siding and rusting iron. Directly across the road was a two-storey brick factory of dirty yellow brick with a modern florescent sign: SMITHS' TOOL AND DIE WORKS (5).

Although the transition from her old to her new life is a painful one – and it is complicated by beginning junior high in the midst of such changes – Barb is able to draw strength from two sources. She discovers a "secret garden" hid-