

ren's picture books: A selective reference guide, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988) compiled with Sylvia Marantz, he comments, "In remaining text-bound we fail to exploit sufficiently the visual qualities of books that...cause us delight". When we deal with a poetic text that could stand proudly on its own without accompanying illustrations, we find it difficult to avoid feeling textbound. We agree with Barto that in helping the child to respond the illustrator carries a heavy responsibility. And so we struggle along the rocky shore in the effort to deal not just with text, not just with visuals, but with something new that calls both together.

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OVERT AND COVERT CONTENT IN CURRENT ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Louis and the night sky. Nicola Morgan. Illus. author. Oxford University Press, 1990. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540746-6; **Jeremiah and Mrs. Ming.** Sharon Jennings. Illus. Mireille Levert. Annick Press, 1990. 24 pp., \$14.95 \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-079-0, 1-55037-078-2; **Ellie and the ivy.** Allen Morgan. Illus. Steven Beinicke. Oxford University Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540726-1; **Zoe and the mysterious X.** Richard Thompson. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick Press, 1989. 24 pp., cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-081-2, 1-550 37-080-4; **Effie's bath** Richard Thompson. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Annick Press, 1989. 30 pp., \$14.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-055-3, 1-55037-052-9; **Alice and the birthday giant.** John. F. Green. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1989. 40 pp., \$14.95. cloth. ISBN 0-590-73139-4; **Now, now Markus or I need a bird.** Martin Aver. Illus. Simone Klages. Annick Press, 1990. Unpag., \$8.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-092-8.

Research on illustrated children's literature is frequently dismissed in academic circles with derisive smiles and restrained nods. "Kiddies' lit" usually occupies the bottom rung of the literary ladder; research on illustrations in children's books is not part of the ladder of art history which supports academics who interpret drawings by Goya, Blake or Beardsly within the social context of the artist's era. Certainly, illustrated children's literature currently on the Canadian market reflects the social and cultural concerns of our time. The books under review give evidence that obverse and subverse socio-political issues are woven within the text *and* the images of these seemingly so innocent and decorative books. I hope that this cross-section of current publications will provide skeptics with food for thought. In fact, serious research concerning the

visual and literary content of illustrated children's books may prove to be an untapped source for understanding more about our cultural climate.

Nicola Morgan in *Louis and the night sky* (Oxford, 1990) leads the child from the intimate circle of the parents' loving embrace via a cold and lonely journey past distant planets, back to the safe bedroom at home. Particularly in the initial illustrations, Nicola Morgan expresses the feelings experienced by children when put to bed. The first image, a circular composition, is a close-up of Louis and his parents, who kiss him goodnight. The next step of going to sleep is integrated in the two following compositions, a double page, where Louis is separated from his parents. The transition from intimacy and affection to a cold and distant journey through space is accomplished successfully when Louis, with a glance through the telescope, makes a wish and begins his voyage to the planets. The artist-author introduces in her book the names of the planets, and links them to personal experiences of sleepless children. Her accomplished images, like gloomy clouds of Venus, swirling storms around Jupiter and rocks whizzing near Saturn, associate threatening weather conditions, known to children, with these unknown planets. The book's sensible suggestion – that it is better to stay in bed and close your eyes than to go on a cold and lonely expedition – might be more significant to the child than knowing the names and scientific features of the luminaries. Seen in the context of the enormous increase in our scientific knowledge of these planets, Nicola Morgan's book is introducing a topical subject to her young audience.

In comparison with *Louis and the night sky*, Sharon Jennings' *Jeremiah and Mrs. Ming* (Annick, 1990) is deceptive in appearing to have less educational content for pre-school children. Mireille Levert's illustrations reflect an unusual aesthetic sensitivity. In particular, her images convey the impression that Mrs. Ming, an oriental lady who wears her ethnic clothes with confidence, is not at all a stereotyped immigrant functioning in a subordinate role. The text indicates that Mrs. Ming is a polite, yet decisive, woman who can quiet down all disturbances which keep Jeremiah from falling asleep. Apart from



that, she plays a musical instrument, practices ballet, reads the "Financial Times", bakes cookies and expresses a loving care for the little blond boy. Mrs. Ming obviously is a typical, well-educated, middle-class Canadian woman. The text and the illustrations of this attractive book succeed in presenting a positive attitude towards the ethnic diversity of the Canadian population. Seen from a sociological perspective, this book helps to erase the outdated cliché that all immigrants are uncultured, uneducated, poor people who represent the lowest social or economic class of the community they left behind. This book

further advocates that, in Canada, people from diverse ethnic backgrounds should feel comfortable in retaining their distinct cultural characteristics. Seen in the shadow of "Meech Lake", this modest but beautiful book has a significant content, subtly advocating a multicultural tolerance.

Ellie and the ivy (Oxford, 1989), by Allan Morgan, is a tale about a little girl who lives in an old-fashioned hotel. Covered with well-established ivy, this "hotel" is situated in "splendid isolation" from the rest of the community. The innuendos aimed at satirizing aloof Ivy League institutions which seem so "marvellous" and so utterly boring might not escape adult readers. Ellie, the protagonist, complains about her boredom to the ivy growing outside on the stone walls, walls which are designed in an architectural style popularly known as "campus-gothic". The ivy confides to Ellie: "For once I'd just like to grow wherever I want to grow and do whatever I want to do." The initial spoof on Ivy League institutions evolves into a rebellious rampage of this personified ivy which breaks loose from its respectable background and goes wild. As in other recently published illustrated children's books, the intelligent and sensible female protagonist puts everything back into its place. The moral lesson of this disguised satire is that a well-established social background does not give one a licence to go on a rampage and become inconsiderate of others. Steve Beinicke illustrates this book in a competent, yet conservative, style which tends to stereotype the facial expressions of the characters.

In *Zoe and the mysterious X* (Annick, 1990), Richard Thompson explores how the senseless logic of officialdom disrupts the lives of ordinary citizens, like Zoe and her parents. This book demonstrates that a little girl can resolve an incredible nuisance caused by a bureaucratic error. Ruth Ohi's skill as an illustrator is evident in her effective use of composition and in the proportional relationships of pictorial objects. The drawings capture the oppressive chaos caused by that one mysterious X. This book combines ecological concerns with



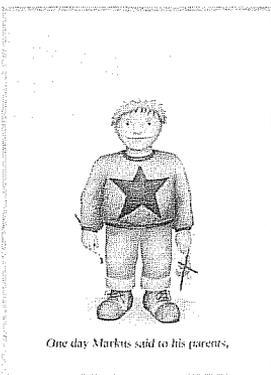
progressive attitudes towards women. It contrasts these issues to arbitrary bureaucratic decisions which disrupt the quality of life of many people. Today, these topics are far more germane to our society than a prosaic trip to Edward Lear's "The owl and the pussy-cat," the subject of Richard Thompson's other book, *Effie's bath* (Annick, 1989).

John Green, the author of *Alice and the birthday giant* (North Winds Press, 1989), presents the reader with a sizable problem when Alice's big wish for her birthday materializes into a giant laying in her bed. The climax of this book occurs

when this polite old giant decides to enter the kitchen where Alice and her guests are about to eat hotdogs and cake. In Maryann Kovalski's illustrations, Alice's father is the first one to flee, followed by the birthday guests, while her mother faints on the floor. Only Alice remains calm. This funny scene plants the seeds for the covert content of the book: basic feminist issues which are acceptable to most women today. Kovalski's visual interpretation of Green's text shows the pre-reader that Alice's big old giant (actually a metaphor for male superiority) disrupts an important event in Alice's life. In this crisis, Alice's fainting mother does not dare to face this giant. The frumpish mother, with sturdy sandals, hairy legs and a peace symbol on her apron is not a peace-activist but an unattractive female role model. Alice turns to a professional woman, Ms McKracken, whose affirmative action assists her in resolving "magically" this oversized old problem. *Alice and the birthday giant* is an innocent-looking book with a strong covert message, not inappropriate for the 1990s when stereotyped opinions about the place of women are being replaced by views supporting the equality of the sexes.

The English translation of a German illustrated children's book by Martin Auer and Simone Klages, *Bimbo und sein vogel* ("Bimbo and his bird"), is wisely given the new title *Now, now, Markus or I need a bird* (Annick, 1990). This two-part title cleverly synthesizes the content of this book.

Markus is a German boy wearing western jeans and a green sweater with a big red star on it. He tells his parents that he "needs" a bird, an odd request which they refuse. The boy specifies that he wants a bird without a cage and if he does not get it he threatens to drop dead. An unsuspecting Canadian audience might think that this kid is just another typical headstrong, spoiled brat! However, in the context of the socio-political climate of West Germany,



One day Markus said to his parents,

the red star on the boy's green sweater is similar to the ubiquitous red star of the Russian army, while the other half of his clothes, his jeans, are the uniform dress code of boys and girls in western Europe and North America. Markus' need for an uncaged bird alludes to his personal need for freedom. In contrast, his parents' restrictive clichés can be seen as the pat answers given by those in power. Markus buys his bird, a white swan – the bird of Venus, symbol of love. Both parents promptly reject this new pet so that Markus and the swan "walk out". They enter the dark, perilous forest, an old metaphor for unforeseen danger. In the illustration, the swan takes the boy under his

wing, which complements the text mentioning that he protects him from aggressive animals lurking in the dark.

The next day, Markus and the swan dare to confront a giant. When this evil

man gobbles them up, the swan is again Markus' "saviour" because its fluttering wings make the giant so nauseated that he retches them up and spits them out. After this, the giant begins to regurgitate an incredible stream of the most impossible things he has swallowed. The long list of items contained in his stomach is truly amazing. However, there is more to this than just a "fun" list. The astronomical stream of matter is illustrated on the page like the Milky Way and can be interpreted again as a metaphor. This odd combination of disparate things, for several years captive in the immense stomach, has been systematically kneaded together by the giant's digestive system. It is interesting, however, that in the illustrations the stream escaping from the belly is not the homogeneous mass one would expect. It is a stream of individual objects. The retched-up matter alludes to the stream of wretched individuals who, in the latter part of the 1980s, began to escape in increasing numbers from the sick Soviet giant.

Dirty, scratched, and with torn clothes, Markus and the swan return home. His father and mother still answer in clichés. Covert references to refugees from the Communist Block being accepted into West Germany are quite apparent in the passage where Markus asks his parents: "And may all the others that were inside the giant come and live with me too?" Surprisingly, the parents' unhesitating answer is "absolutely." The book ends with Markus saying "time for the tub." This "washing clean" implies, of course, that this German boy will take off the torn sweater with the red star and the well-worn western jeans – clothes which covered the two halves of his body. This undressing is implied to take place in the immediate future and alludes to the unification of East and West Germany.

This brilliant, self-effacing book provides ample evidence that there is more to "kiddies' lit" than pretty pictures and silly stories. Annick's scoop to publish the translation of this West German book provides Canadian readers, authors, illustrators and students of children's literature with a challenging publication.

The books under review reinforce the fact that current publications of illustrated children's literature reflect in overt and covert ways the social, political and cultural concerns of our time. *Louis and the night sky* presents, in a straightforward manner, information about the planets; *Jeremiah and Mrs. Ming* implies tolerance towards ethnic diversity in Canada; *Ellie and the ivy* combines an overt female protagonist with a disguised criticism of those with Ivy League backgrounds; *Zoe and the mysterious X* also promotes a female role model. The latter instills ecological awareness, implies that free enterprise is not a means to an end and criticizes an uncaring bureaucracy which is not people-oriented: these are issues which are politically relevant to our social context. In contrast, *Alice and the birthday giant* has a hidden agenda which promotes feminist values. Finally, *Now, now, Markus or I need a bird* pleads in covert metaphors the cause of German unification free from Communist or

Allied occupation. Without any doubt, these visual books for pre-readers or young readers are powerful tools which manipulate with subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, methods the opinions of children and adults – that is, a large part of the population.

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PLAYS AND FANTASIES

Playhouse: Six fantasy plays for children. Joyce Doolittle. Northern Lights Books for Children, 1989. 202 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-028-8.

This collection of six plays by Canadian writers is a useful tool for teachers, librarians and theatre companies (both amateur and professional). It provides workable and imaginative scripts for child-audiences ranging from kindergarten ("Friends" and "The old woman and the pedlar") to grade nine ("Swimmers" and "Prairie dragons").

The term "fantasy" is emphasized in the title and introduction where it refers both to "fantasy" and "play". In two plays, *Swimmers* and *Friends* she quotes Bruno Bettelheim's *The uses of enchantment*, on the playful concept of fantasy: "Spinning out daydreams – ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures..., the child fits unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content".

Friends by Tom Bentley-Fisher focusses on the playing and on the real life-and-death concerns of children in a day care centre. One character learns to play and emerges from her shell at the same time the ducklings do (though some of them don't make it). *Swimmers*, a clever thought-provoking script by Clem Martini, explores the danger zones of play and fantasy worlds in which a child could become lost to reality. Both plays could be termed psychological problem plays as well as fantasies.

This playful quality strengthens our love of the great "if" of drama. As Peter Brook says in *The empty space* "in everyday life 'if' is a fiction, in the theatre 'if' is an experiment." Joyce Doolittle encourages playfulness in staging by incorporating design and production concepts within the scripts. How do dragons fly on stage? Douglas McCullough shows us. The use of different type face and drawings in the margin of the text is most successful in *The old woman and the pedlar* by Betty Jane Wylie and *Prairie dragons* by Sharon Pollock. The drawings of costume and props for comic business (by Tara Tyan) are particularly helpful in *The old woman and the pedlar* which combines nursery rhyme with exaggerated clowning.