chine" – a team of robots – Michel begins to acquire a social conscience – a process which culminates in the discovery that his team's owner is not only involved in robot manufacture, but in a far more sinister plot to use android technology to establish human tyranny. (Adolph Eichmann in aluminum!) The novel concludes with Michel's discovery that, since his owner controls the media and the police, Michel is in effect powerless to resist him.

Empire concludes with a similar loss of innocence. Investigating the murder of his idol, pop star and activist John Goodman (a cynical rip-off of John Lennon, complete down to Asian wife), Nicholas St-Laurent uncovers a bizarre cult dealing in brainwashing and death. He is almost killed by his withdrawn and neglected teen-age sister who has, unbeknownst to her indifferent brother, also become a member of the cult. At the novel's close, he must accept both his own guilt and his failure to secure any social response to the villains.

What is right about these two novels is their refusal to deal in moral oversimplification and cheap assurances of a rosy future. (*Shooting* has won three awards including the Canada Council prize for juvenile literature.) What is wrong with them is almost everything else. Characterization is shallow, the plots deal with predictably trendy issues, and occasionally rupture, rather than merely suspend, the reader's sense of disbelief (as when Nicholas' guitar deflects his sister's bullets!). Dialogue is also predictable and wooden – even at the hands of two different translators (I have not had an opportunity to examine the French text). M. Côté's demonstrated skills as a storyteller are, in short, inadequate to his moral vision – as Twain's and Kipling's are not. A juvenile audience can be no excuse; children – especially children – deserve better. Despite M. Côté's ten novels, even desperate Canadians will have to allow him a little more time to master the tools of his craft.

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MIXING FANTASY AND REALITY: FOUR PICTURE BOOKS

The tinder box. Michael Bedard. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Oxford University Press, 1990. 28 pp., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540767-9; **The magic paintbrush**. Robin Muller. Doubleday, 1989. 32 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25228-5; **The beast**. Alice Bartels. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick Press, 1990. Unpag., $14.95, $5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-101, 1-55037-102-9; **Cowboy dreams**. Dayal Kaur Khalsa. Tundra Books, 1990. 32 pp., $17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-245-X.

Because children must discover both the possibilities that life offers as well as the restraints it imposes, tales that mingle fantasy and reality are particularly

potent vehicles for the expression of the rich but often poignant ambiguities of human existence. Each of these four tales, through a mixture of the fantastic and the real, attempt the difficult task of offering the promise of fulfillment without denying those limitations that qualify our dreams and desires.

Hans Christian Andersen's *The tinder box* offers a compelling mixture of realism and fantasy. From the first paragraph, we feel the invasive force of the soldier who seems to march fresh out of real life into a fairy tale world where, with the help of a witch and three fantastic dogs, he finds riches, becomes king and marries a beautiful princess. In his "unique retelling" (as the cover describes it) of "The tinder box," Michael Bedard retains some of the animating complexity that distinguishes the original. Bedard's satisfyingly zestful narrative allows us to enjoy the soldier's successes without letting us forget the unsavoury greed that motivates him, for the soldier is not a perfect hero.

In one respect, though, Bedard dilutes the impact of the original story. In Bedard's version, the soldier meets an old woman who reveals herself as a witch. The honest soldier, terrified, justifiably protects himself. In Andersen's story, the soldier simply cuts off the witch's head and walks off, not the least bit frightened. Andersen's soldier *is* a soldier: the matter-of-fact beheading of the witch reminds us that his trade is killing, and we are thereby warned that, however appealing the soldier may be, we cannot accept him without reservation. By providing the soldier with an acceptable motive, Bedard makes him a less ambiguous but also less potent character.

If Bedard's alteration tends to flatten the impact of Andersen's story, Regolo Ricci's illustrations splendidly convey the uncomfortable but exciting ambivalence of the original. Throughout the book, Ricci maintains a compelling mixture of vivacity and threat. Dark backgrounds act as foils to colourful, spirited figures, often painted from unusual and dramatic perspectives. Against the shadowy depths of the chambers beneath the hollow tree, Ricci's soldier greedily helps himself to the treasure boxes guarded by the three enormous dogs. Comfortingly hound-like, these dogs, with their monstrous eyes and sharp fangs, are also ominous. Like the soldier himself, they are at once attractive, amusing and dangerous.

In the closing illustration, Ricci vividly encapsulates the double-edged quality of the tale (Fig. 1). Here is the wished-for happy ending, brightly and abundantly spread before us. But the overshadowing presence of the grotesque dogs at the wedding feast evoke the realistic but disturbing imperfections that qualify this happy culmination of the soldier's ambitions and desires.

Fig. 1

Robin Muller's *The magic paintbrush* also deals in the magical fulfill-

ment of desires. A penniless orphan boy named Nib, who dreams of being an artist, is given a magic paintbrush that will allow him to make his drawings literally "come to life." Unfortunately, his magical paintings draw the attention of an evil and avaricious connoisseur king. After cleverly using his magical paintbrush to escape the king, Nib throws it away when he realizes that the best pictures are "the ones you make with your heart."

Robin Muller's complex and richly evocative illustrations make kaleidoscopic connections to artists of different periods and styles. For instance, the opening scene in Victorian London nonchalantly places Toulouse Lautrec among Dickensian waifs while figures escaped from Seurat's paintings share the street with a signboard carrier wearing Millais' famous soap advertisement (Fig 2). A grainy, sooty texture suggests the quality of old, tinted etchings faded by an accumulation of years and grime. This unifying patina seems to suggest a weariness with the weight of the visual heritage packed into the pictures. In fact, Muller jettisons this culture at the end of the story when, disenchanted with the effects of his magic paintbrush, Nib goes back to making charcoal sketches fresh from "the heart."

Fig. 2

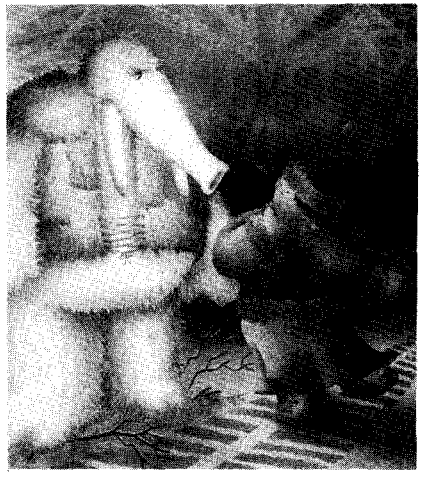
Displaying an unusual and welcome appeal to the reader's interest in art, Muller's pictures playfully entice us to discover the sources of the pictorial clues they contain. It is disappointing, then, to find that the outcome of the story denies this sophistication in favour of the simplistic idea that true art has no need of cultural baggage.

A major problem is Muller's text, which does not sustain the richness of the illustrations. In contrast to interesting, carefully-crafted images, the writing seems unpolished, relying on worn expressions, and lacking complexity. Waterfront thugs are described as "river rats ... eager to pound the living daylights" out of their victims. The evil king "hisses" and screams like a melodrama villain while Nib, throughout all his trials, remains a glowingly good boy. Instead of a meaningful engagement between Nib's dreams of becoming an artist and the limiting conditions the world of art imposes, Muller offers an uncomplicated and unsatisfying return to a state of nature and artistic innocence.

Far more balanced and satisfying is *The beast*, written by Alice Bartels and illustrated by the award-winning Gilles Tibo. This subtle, beautifully written story is perfectly matched by Tibo's superb illustrations. Set in the far north, the tale involves a young girl who, lost in the winter night, is rescued by a strange but kindly mammoth-like beast and his companion, an old woman. Resonant with images of fire and ice, light and dark, warmth and frost, Bartels' intricate narrative gently but profoundly blends the magical possibilities

of life with its tragic limitations. The beast and the old woman, both the last of their kind, tell their own stories, quietly conveying the inevitability of death while they shelter and nourish the child who is given back to life.

Matching the elegance and restraint of the text, Tibo's illustrations subtly employ texture and colour to produce the poignant contrasting of elements essential to this work. Frosty surfaces combine with glowing colour; the beast himself, with his great body covered in silvery fur, is at once real and fantastic, warmly approachable and icily remote (Fig. 3).



Alive with such paradoxes, *The beast* is a remarkable book. Like the beast and the old woman who inhabit its pages, this work offers comfort and reassurance, without condescension and without diminishing either the wonders that inspire or the enigmas that perplex us.

Created with equal power but in a very different style is Dayal Kaur Khalsa's *Cowboy dreams*. This is the last work of the talented author/artist who died in 1989 after a tragically brief but distinguished career as a children's writer and illustrator. In *Cowboy dreams*, as always, Khalsa uses the bright, opaque colours and naive perspectives that give her work an engagingly childlike quality. Khalsa's text has the same dignified simplicity, speaking to children without affectation and with a quiet sense of humour that allows her to touch on profound issues without a hint of pretension.

Cowboy dreams is the story of a girl whose one great dream is to own a horse. Although this desire is never realized, she responds to her frustrations by creating a rich fantasy world. In Khalsa's illustration the girl rides the bannister railing of the basement stairway, singing the songs that carry her into the mountains, plains and canyons of her dreams, in "the land of cowboys" (Fig. 4). The basement washing line becomes a cowboy's lasso, the ordinary wood panelling is transformed into rocky cliffs, and the wall-to-wall carpeting stretches out into the wide open spaces of the desert.

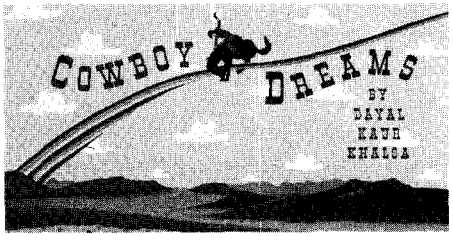


Fig. 4

Khalsa never forgets the boundaries imposed on dreams. The girl knows that, because her father is a tailor and not a wealthy maharaja, she "wasn't going to get that horse." But looking at paintings of horses,

watching old Gene Autry movies, and singing the cowboy songs that so poignantly evoke her loss and her longing, the girl finds ways to enter a wider, less restricting world.

Even death, the end of all our dreams, loses its terrifying finality in Khalsa's hands. On the last page, the girl, following a cowboy mounted on a golden palomino, rides away on her toy horse, through a mountain scene where the setting sun blazes and turns a river to a stream of red. There are images of death here; but they are presented, through the vivid beauty of the scene, with a sense of quiet affirmation. The imaginative power that lives in our "cowboy dreams" will carry us over the inevitable endings and losses.

While confronting her own death, Khalsa created a beautiful work that, like all her other creations, catches us with its profound whimsy. The last words of *Cowboy dreams* poignantly convey her affirmation of fantasy and humour; Khalsa makes her farewell in the true cowboy spirit.

> And, you know, every once in a while I find myself humming one of those old sweet songs – and I feel as bold and brave and free as a cowboy again. *Giddyap*!

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CONTORTIONS OF VARIOUS KINDS

Uncle Henry's dinner guests. Bénédicte Froissart. Illus. Pierre Pratt. Adapt. David Homel. Annick Press, 1990. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-141-X; **Willy Nilly**. Marie-Louise Gay. Illus. author. Stoddart, 1990. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2429-X; **My mother's loves: Stories and lies from my childhood**. Stéphane Poulin. Illus. author. Annick, 1990. Unpag., $15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-149-5.

If picture books have a purpose, perhaps redemptive in nature, it's surely to explore and encourage the innate optimism of children, their imaginative apprehension of the world, their unbounded curiosity and their inarticulated belief that good humour, love and playfulness are real, natural, and indispensable feelings adults also share or, at least, can remember in troubled times. With varying degrees of success, all three of these particular books contribute to our sense of joy and renewal.

Uncle Henry's dinner guests is a simple story about a visiting uncle much loved by his nieces and nephews for his storytelling abilities. At the dinner table, however, the children are admonished by their parents to keep still and quiet. But author Bénédicte Froissart recognizes that beneath restraint and table manners lurks the dynamic world of narrative and transformations.