

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.

Uncle Henry wears a special shirt "with chickens on it." As the children observe, "a little orange chicken started to move." The tale depicts the perambulations of this chicken and the other chickens during the course of the meal. The parents, of course, are unaware of the fantastic occurrences under their very nose, even when one of the fowls "laid a great big egg in the middle of his raspberry ice cream."

Froissart delightfully dramatizes a child's ability to re-order the world in the face of parents who misunderstand their fidgeting at table and Uncle Henry's various contortions – both of which are seen as mere naughtiness and rudeness.

The illustrations by Pierre Pratt, for which he has been nominated for a 1990 Governor General's award, at first appear odd in their use of bold planes of contrasting colours and their distorted shapes and angles. After one has read the story and perused the pictures over and over, however, Pratt's artwork becomes contagious and absolutely appropriate to the story.

As one of his recent picture books demonstrates, *Benjamin and the pillow saga* (Annick, 1989), Stéphane Poulin's world is a happy one where problems are minor, perils illusory, bad news evanescent and where, with a wave of the author's narrative wand, anything can happen. For Poulin, whimsy lies at the heart of a child's universe. *My mother's loves: Stories and lies of my childhood* is no different in this regard from his other books. Poulin's detailed and humorous canvases in this book, often approaching gentle satire, have won him another Governor General's award nomination for illustration. I do find, however, that Poulin's written text is rather weak. Charming, yes, warm-hearted, of course. I have no complaints with the tone of his writing. But his story lacks any real narrative logic. Even fantasy, above all fantasy, requires adherence to some sort of law and order. If anything is possible and/or permissible, then nothing is memorable, narratively speaking.

My mother's loves consists of vignettes and minuscule tall-tales about, presumably, the author's childhood. He lived "in the country in between two cabbage patches" in a rambunctious household too small to hold the furniture stacked in the yard "until we needed it." During a flood, the family huddled on the rooftop and "there were cabbages floating everywhere." An elephant swims by, is cared for by the children, and eventually returned to the zoo. The garbage truck mistakenly hauls away the furniture. The family runs after it. Mother falls in love with the sanitation engineer.

The "stories" and "lies" are really briefly stated assertions, true, false, embroidered as the case may be, written with tongue in cheek, as substantial as bubbles. But children will lose themselves in the rich and funny paintings which contain a lot of information and excitement and, in the end, are far more interesting than the written text.

The hallmark of Marie-Louise Gay's pictorial style, if anything, must be sheer freneticism. Her pictures want to leap beyond the pages. Lacking the

depth of Poulin, the dramatic use of colour of Pratt, they are nonetheless rich in humour, relevant to the text and crazy, a word meant kindly here, in orientation. Her characters and all their paraphernalia are always jumping, bounding, exploding in a kind of Alice in Wonderland raciness.

Willy Nilly, as in one of Gay's previous books, *Rainy day magic*, also depicts the transformative power of magic and imagination. In this case, it's imagination bereft of intellectual control and moral purpose. Willy receives a mysterious birthday present enabling him to become a powerful magician. Without learning everything there is to know about what he's doing, he transforms his sister Tulip into a pink elephant, but cannot find the way of changing her back again. What is worse, his magic goes to his head: "I must be the most powerful magician in the world. I could be the king of magicians."

How Willy's egomania is deflated and how his "victims" are restored to their true forms are told in a brisk and clear style. Unlike Poulin, she has a storytelling ability that goes beyond whimsy. Both text and energetic pictures of *Willy Nilly* will keep readers interested and their sense of justice satisfied.

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PICTURE BOOKS OF VARYING QUALITY

Mortimer Mooner stopped taking a bath! Frank Edwards. Illus. John Bianchi. Bungalo Books, 1990. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-921285-20-5; **P. Bear's New Year's party!** Paul Owen Lewis. Silvio Mattacchione & Co., 1989. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-9692640-8-9; **Thomas knew there were pirates living in the bathroom.** Beth Parker. Illus. Renée Mansfield. Black Moss Press, 1990. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-201-2; **Jane's loud mouth.** Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Kimberly Hart. Ragweed Press, 1990. Unpag., \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-10-1; **Binky Bemelman and the big city begonia.** Mia Hansen. Black Moss Press, 1990. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-206-3.

Not every picture book is destined to become an award-winning piece of art or literature. Some picture books deserve to be purchased simply because they offer children the opportunity to compare and evaluate, a useful exercise in its own right. These books provide reading practice and the opportunity to flex a child's imagination. Having said that, one must be careful not to promote marginal books. With book budgets shrinking, no one can afford to buy poor quality books for the sake of teaching discriminating taste. And publishers must take the responsibility of producing quality books instead of allowing me-