

CAT AND DINOSAUR, MONSTER AND MOUSE

Speedy Sam. Dorothy Jean Harris. Scholastic, 1989. 51 pp., \$3.95. ISBN 0-590-73214-4; **No Dinosaurs in the park.** Dorothy Jean Harris. Illus. Sylvie Daigneault. Scholastic, 1990. 24 pp., \$11.95. ISBN 0-590-73210-2; **The mystery of the Turtle Lake monster.** Jeni Mayer. Thistle-down, 1990. 126 pp., \$5.95. ISBN 0-920633-68-4; **Sparky.** Matt Troke. Jespersion Press, 1989. Unpag. \$7.95. ISBN 0-921692-20-X.

It is not always easy to predict the success of a children's book; what appeals to an adult is not necessarily the same thing that appeals to a younger reader. Authors and publishers of juvenile literature therefore need to keep in mind two different and possibly conflicting audiences: the adults who choose children's books, and the children for whom they are chosen.

Picture books may be the easiest for adults and children to share. *No dinosaurs in the park* (also available in French as *Pas de dinosaures dans le parc*) should charm the three- to seven-year-old set (not five-eight, as the publisher suggests) as much as their parents, though for different reasons. While children will enjoy the way the little girl and her grandfather transform ordinary denizens of a city park into creatures from the past, parents will appreciate the way the book reinforces the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and effortlessly teaches the names and identities of four different dinosaurs.

Appealing to children for a different reason is *Sparky*, a book of cat cartoons by Matt Troke of Trillingate, Newfoundland, who was only fifteen when his book was published in 1989. Young readers recognize Sparky as a distant relative of Garfield; rather than deprecate what an adult might view as derivativeness, they enjoy the familiarity of this connection, and find Sparky's adventures more accessible than those of his verbose and cynical predecessor. What especially fascinates juvenile readers is the youthfulness of the author. Children are enthralled by the exploits and achievements of other children (as the advertising industry well knows); greater exposure to child-authored texts like this one would, I think, both inspire and empower children who like to write and illustrate their own stories.

Speedy Sam, the lively story of a boy's attempt to capture the mouse in his kitchen, fills a niche that seems to be generally overlooked by the creators of children's books: the need for short chapter-books (as my children call them) for elementary reader (grades two-four). Consisting of seven chapters of seven to eight pages, with each chapter containing one full-page illustration, this book is perfectly structured to engage the beginning reader who wants the satisfaction of a longer book, without the frustration of small print and dauntingly long chapters. Skillfully using a limited vocabulary, Dorothy Joan Harris creates enough mystery at the end of each chapter to incite even a reluctant

reader on to the next. This book is available in French as *Cléo, la souris express*; I find the gender transition rather intriguing.

Jeni Mayer's *The mystery of the Turtle Lake monster* demonstrates that writing for younger readers is not as easy as the work of an experienced author like Dorothy Joan Harris makes it look. When I read this book aloud to my younger child, I felt some impatience with its style, and was able to omit many phrases and sentences without losing any of the flavour or plot. However, my resident grade seven student, who reads for plot rather than style, liked the book enough to make it the subject of a very successful classroom presentation. Nonetheless he did comment that he had figured out the mystery long before the child sleuths who discover the origins of a Saskatchewan Nessie. As with the Hardy boy novels, the reader here identifies firmly with the youthful detectives who eventually outwit evil adults. On the basis of my limited household experience, I would suggest that this book meets both the reading level and sleuthing skills of children of about nine to eleven years in age (grades four and five).

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TWO FACETS OF CHRISTMAS

Grandfather Christmas. Brian Pilkington. Breakwater, 1990. Unpag., cloth. ISBN 1-55081-019-7; **The little crooked Christmas tree.** Michael Cutting. Illus. Ron Broda. Scholastic-TAB, 1990. Unpag., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-73652-3.

Grandfather Christmas and *The little crooked Christmas tree* are two picture-books that focus on familiar Christmas images – a department store "Santa Claus" and the Christmas tree – to explore respectively the societal and spiritual aspects of Christmas. Interestingly, neither has a child hero. Rather, the books show childlike protagonists gaining self-realization only at Christmas-time because it enables them to give to others in their own unique way. *Grandfather Christmas*, by Icelandic illustrator/author Brian Pilkington, is a light-hearted exploration of the life of Harry, a grandfather, whose highlight of each year is playing Santa. A kindly, very active old man, he lives with his children and looks after his grandchildren, but tries to find various part-time work on the side. Harry's life is humorous because his unusually long, luxuriant beard causes him continual difficulties. Harry's misadventures while working as a hotel porter and his innovative compensations while bathing or exercising are extended by the detailed, exaggerated colour drawings. Espe-