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MUNSCH PUNCH MISSING

Good families don't. Robert Munsch. Doubleday Canada, 1990. 32 pp., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25267-6.

Canadians do not take kindly to commercial success. Last year's Canada Council jury snubbed Mordecai Richler, no one in children's literature takes Gordon Korman seriously, and Robert Munsch is on the outs these days as well. This prolific storyteller is accused of writing light-weight, formula stories; school librarians object to the violence in *Giant*; critics complain of the failure to teach a lesson about junk food in *Something good*; and everyone but kids is offended by the subject matter of *Good families don't*, which is, in case you haven't heard, farts.

The accusation of formula writing holds water only if the focus is on one portion – admittedly a large one – of Munsch's output: the inverted cautionary tales (*Mortimer*, *I have to go*, *Thomas's swimsuit*, *Pigs*, *Something good*, *Angela's airplane*), in which the child protagonist flouts authority, generates chaos, and bests the adults in the end. But Munsch casts a wider net, assaying a range of genres and story types: folklore (*A Promise is a promise*), parodied folklore (*Giant*, *David's father*, *Paper bag princess*), sentimental fiction (*Love you forever*), quest tales (*Murmel, murmel, murmel*).

Perhaps Munsch is an easy mark because he is so funny. For those who prefer uplift to laughter, a comedy earns no marks, no matter how well-crafted (Munsch reworks his oral stories at least three years before committing them to print). To transform an oral to a written tale successfully is not easy. The Grimm brothers' result was scholarly but lacklustre; with their greater poetic gifts, Joel Chandler Harris and Joseph Jacobs captured the oral flavour of black American and British storytelling brilliantly. Munsch does the same for tales told to preschoolers, using a hybrid language of juvenile turns of phrase ("Hey you DUMB PIGS") and adult compensations for children's deficits of vocabulary and syntax ("completely all over muddy," "very deep policemen-type voices," "expensive princess clothes").

He also knows when and how to use a refrain ("up the aisle and down the aisle, up the aisle and down the aisle"), demonstrates an acute ear for the onomatopoeic ("murmel, murmel, murmel," "broum broum broum", "clang, clang, rattle-bing-bang") and takes numerical hyperbole ("seventeen diaper salesmen,

"300 chocolate bars") to the limits. If these devices irritate us with their frequency, we should remember that they are the stuff of oral literature.

None of this makes *Good families don't*, an early Munsch story which he had difficulty getting published, a good book. But its weakness is not formula, overworked devices, or scatological content.

In *Good families*, Carmen confronts a "great big purple, green and yellow fart" on her bed; she tells her father, her mother, and the police, (who deny the fact saying "Don't be ridiculous. Good families like ours do not have farts"). Finally, Carmen repulses the fart with a sweet-smelling rose up its nose. Convinced, the adults chorus, "THAT WAS A FART!", prompting Carmen's retort, "Don't be ridiculous. Good families like ours do not have farts."

At first glance, this is a rerun of *Mud puddle*: three confrontations with a creature finally repelled by its nemesis. But *Mud puddle*'s humour operates on two levels – for kids, the antics of the mud puddle monster; for adults, the familiar preschool ploy of guilt projected onto an imaginary creature. The humour of *Good families don't* is simplistic – a satire on adult hypocrisy, as exposed by a child. *Mud puddle* adds an arch wink at the adult reader.

Good families' style lacks the usual Munschian punch. Compare the delightfully awkward syntax of "and got completely all over muddy" with *Good families*' "to run completely away," the force of Jule Ann's "Hey, Mud Puddle!" with the adults' predictable "Awk! Glach! Argggg!" on meeting the fart.

The humour of the book's cumulative motif, which culminates in its best line ("Don't be ridiculous," said the police. "Good Canadians do not have farts. What would the Americans say?") is purely verbal and for adults only. Here again, *Mud puddle* is more complex, with *three* highly visual cumulative patterns: Jule Ann's sorties to the garden to await the mud puddle's attacks, Jule Ann's increasing dirtiness ("Even her ears were full of mud," "Even her nose was full of mud"), and the crescendo of body parts washed:

She washed out her ears.
She washed out her eyes.
She washed out her mouth.
She washed out her nose.
She washed out her belly button.

Alan Daniel's illustrations, through witty and faithful to the text, are almost too overblown and abandoned; there is no let-up to the chaos. The genius of Michael Martchenko, Munsch's usual illustrator, is the *tension* between vertical and diagonal, stillness and movement, poker faces (usually on the children) and caricatured emotions.

When Munsch is good, he is very, very good. Given his output, it is not surprising if he lays a few eggs. But we should recognize the breadth of his efforts and judge each book on its own merits, not as the whims of fashion dictate. It's the least we owe someone who has given so many hours of mirth to so

many children.

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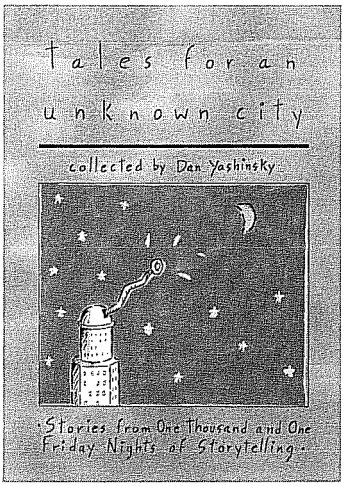
HERE IS GOD'S PLENTY

Tales for an unknown city. Collected by Dan Yashinsky. McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. 265 pp., $29.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7735-0786-8.



The reader of *Tales for an unknown city*, coming to the end of the last story with mixed enjoyment and regret, will be tempted to echo Dryden's appreciation of Chaucer's *Canterbury tales*: "Here is God's plenty." If the comparison is perhaps prompted by the "Prologue" and "The host's tale" which introduce the concept of story and the impetus that brought together these contemporary storytelling pilgrims, it is not undeserved. The first stories were told in 1978, not at an inn but at a café, and the occasions were soon known as the One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling.

The book includes forty-five selections from this continuing celebration of stories. Neither for children, nor for adults, they are for an undifferentiated audience as folktales were originally, accessible in the appeal of their narrative to all but the youngest listeners. Tale by tale they reveal the unknown city, many voices creating an identity that simultaneously affirms its universality and rejoices in its diversity.

Length varies from Alice Kane's seventy-nine-word fable for Canadians about a bilingual mouse to Robert Munsch's twelve-page account of sharing and finding stories in the North-West Territories; age varies from "Andreuccio da Perugia," adapted from a medieval story in the *Decameron*, to "J. Percy Cockatoo," a contemporary version of "Rumpelstiltskin," patriated to the Australian outback. But it is the rich variety and sustained quality of these stories collected by Dan Yashinsky, the original host, that most invite the reader's pleasure and admiration. What Tolkien calls "the Cauldron of Story" is filled here with ingredients from countries and cultures as many and different as those represented in the citizens of Toronto. Each one adds to the flavour, whether it is the story-within-a-story of "Death and Baba Tsganka" or a heart-tugging analogue of the Pygmalion myth from East Africa, whether it