

SEASONS: FOR CHILDREN OR ADULTS?

Seasons: With poetry selected by Alberto Manguel. Warabé Aska. Doubleday, 1990. 48 pp., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25265-X.

At the time of the writing of this review, the finalists for the 1990 Governor General's Literary award in the *illustration* category had just been announced. *Seasons* was on that list. Very few readers would argue that the award nomination was undeserved; however, together with the text, the book just does not work as a child's picture book. Each of the four seasons are represented through five illustrations. The poems, from around the world and from different centuries, were chosen to complement the paintings.

The book is beautifully laid out: the full-page paintings are on the right hand side with the accompanying poem on the left page. The left-hand page of every two page spread has a coloured border – one colour for each season. Within this coloured border can be found the reference for the poem, a brief biography of the poet, and, sometimes, explanatory text. The coloured strips, particularly the blue and white swirls of Winter, can sometimes obscure the small italic printing. But since it is apparent that this book is not to be read alone by children, this flaw is, perhaps, a minor one.

Indeed, the poems are not for children. Their content is adult and there is no sense of rhythm. Even worse – they are not fun! One example is a poem that accompanies – a Summer illustration entitled "Flowers." The poem by Hsueh T'ao is simply, "Blossoms crowd the branches: too beautiful to endure./Thinking of you, I break into bloom again." The author tells us that the poet was the "...daughter of a government official and at the age of ten became a 'singing girl' at the imperial court." What does this mean? The accompanying painting of blooming tropical flowers bursts with colour and life. But instead of blooming with petals of flowers, the plants grow into maidens. The scene is highly reminiscent of spring pagan festivals of fertility and birth. One of the maidens is crowned by a floral wreath. Is she the goddess Flora? The ancient Romans celebrated this festival with an orgiastic delight. Again, I ask, what does this mean and is it appropriate for children?

The only concession that Aska makes to his target audience is a find-and-identify game embedded in one of the paintings. The obvious skill of the illustrator would be better served if aimed at the adult market.

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