Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

THE CONTESTING CLAIMS OF POPULARITY AND POETRY

Why Were All the Werewolves Men? Richard Stevens. Illus. Gail Mikla. Thistledown Press, 1994. 99 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-30-8. **A Terrible Case of the Stars**. Robert Priest. Illus. Don Gauthier. Puffin Books, 1994. 64 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-14-036368-8. **Two Too Many**. Jo Ellen Bogart. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Scholastic, 1994. 11 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-74351-1. **Purple Hair? I Don't Care!** Dianne Young. Illus. Barbara Hartmann. Oxford University Press, 1994. Unpag., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540991-4. **Spider on the Floor**. Raffi. Illus. True Kelley. Crown, 1993. Unpag., $16.50 cloth. ISBN 0-517-59381-5. **I Am Me: Rhymes for Small**. Robin Skelton. Illus. Arwen Williams and Brigid Skelton. Sono Nis Press, 1994. Unpag., $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-049-X. **I Am Small**. Sheree Fitch. Illus. Kim LaFave. Doubleday, 1994. Unpag., $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25455-5.

Is there a difference in the criteria for judging poetry written for children and that for adults? The question, on reflection, seems a little foolish. Surely there shouldn't be, at least not in the essentials. All poetry must share qualities of rhythm, incisive imagery, vivid insight, vigorous language, and that certain magical quality that may be indefinable, but which ensures that real poetry *reaches* you. At its best, it changes you, perhaps only as subtly as a lamp turned on in a dim room, but as unmistakably, as well.

Having said that, and acknowledging that poetry, no matter its intended audience, is a continuum, still we may identify some areas where children's poetry, in its effect, differs from adult poetry. Content is one. Poems for children take their subjects from the small particulars of a child's world and a child's experience. These often differ from adult experience in obvious ways, so that a child will enjoy a funny poem set in school, say, but not an adult poem concerned with aging, perhaps, or grief.

Two words here are keys as well. Enjoy. Funny. As adults we often forget that one of the central aims of poetry is to give pleasure. Children's poetry can be, at its best, a bastion of the primal functions of poetry and the poetic impulse: it delights in laughter and the basic pleasure of rhythm in language (one of the reasons it welcomes nonsense, often a pure celebration of words for their own sake), and it is often best appreciated aloud, preserving the old oral tradition where all poetry began. Books of poetry for children (as opposed to poems spoken, sung, or otherwise performed) are almost always illustrated, too,

something we eschew as adults, though I've never really known why. The verbal and visual arts seem to me to be natural complements to one another, and there are few more delightful literary experiences, for children or adults, than a fine book of illustrated poems.

Seven new books of poetry for children cover the range I have been discussing from rhyming picture books intended for very young children to collections of nonsense, narrative, and lyric verse for older readers. Sadly, not all of it is poetry. Children's verse suffers too often from a degeneration into doggerel, the prime malady of nonsense, and from a lack of rigour in rhythm and imagery that results in prosaic, vague ramblings masquerading as poems. Certainly no subject, rightly approached, is too small for poetry. But likewise sloppy, inferior use of language *is* too small for children.

For older readers there are two collections, one by Robert Priest, *A Terrible Case of the Stars*, and one entitled *Why Were All the Werewolves Men?* by Richard Stevenson. The latter book has an interesting theme, examining the fantastic creatures of myth and folklore, from Canada's Sasquatch to Australia's Bunyip. Stevenson is wide-ranging, and has wisely included some explanatory notes at the end of the book (although an alphabetized glossary might have been more useful) to elaborate on such little-known creatures as the Hapyxelor and the Rumpefusel. The poems, some illustrated (although the illustrations are badly arranged in the book, and often rather indifferent portraits in themselves), are mainly comic descriptions, often dramatic monologues, of the beasts in question. In "Alligators in the Sewer," for instance, Stevenson concludes "A gator's eyes can often stray/ from little snacks to little hams,/ so when you squat on your own loo,/ beware of gators down below./ They like rump roast and not tofu." He is inventive in his use of rhythm and metre and can often be funny. But he too often trips on his own diction. Stevenson's dense, often esoteric range of vocabulary is not reason to quibble in itself, as children can and do swallow very difficult language with gusto. But there must be a larger flow, a music in the lines to carry the unusual or difficult words, and, unfortunately, Stevenson cannot often achieve this.

So, for instance, "The Man-Eating Tree of Madagascar":

> it sups slowly and daintily with six transparent palp-
> itatingly perfect stamen-like straws, and only needs help
> in arranging the naughty unruly truly detestable whelp
> in the acidic cup of its most assiduous petals ...

Whew! You have to positively *wade* through this stuff, and I wonder how many readers would have the patience, particularly when his metre also stumbles and falters under the weight of all those rare and indigestible words. More discretion with the dictionary here might produce more readable, enjoyable poems.

Robert Priest's *A Terrible Case of the Stars* generally avoids these pitfalls. While Priest is less adventurous in rhyme and metre than Stevenson, his pleasant nonsense verse is also more musical and easy on the ear. (I did note, on an aside, that nine of these poems are reprinted virtually unchanged from an earlier Priest collection, *The Ruby Hat*, which seems a little like cheating.) Priest is best at light

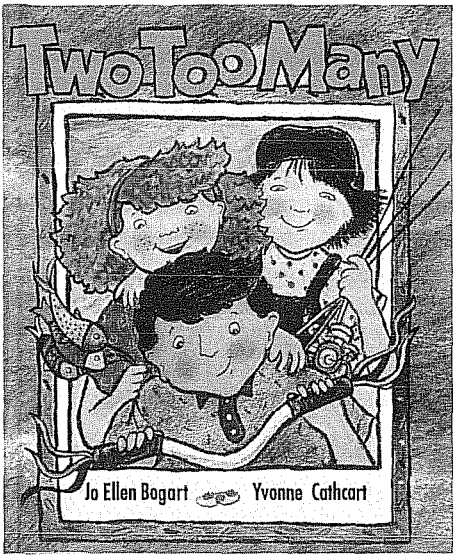
nonsense verse, and is well-served by the vigorous, energetic line drawings of Don Gauthier, whose pictures seem to explode across the page in a witty counterpoint to the poems. Priest writes about robots and food, knights and satellites. But there is nothing really stellar in this collection.

> aaaaah snowflake mind, snowflake mind
> each one, each one is one of a kind
> another one you'll never find
> you'll never find

There is a small echo here of the rhythm of snow falling in big, fat flakes, each one unique. Pleasant it is, but not particularly memorable or striking, and that is the tone of the entire collection.

Of the three picture books in rhyme intended for younger readers than Priest's and Stevenson's books, only one stands out as poetry: *Two Too Many* by JoEllen Bogart. Bogart is well-known for her previous books, and she has a deceptively simple but very distinctive style. Like Richard Stevenson, she is fond of alliteration and internal rhyme. Unlike him, she knows how to use them sparingly, forcefully, and to good effect.

Using the simple concept of "two too many," whether it be spouts on a teapot or wheels on a tricycle, Bogart manages a funny, verbally pleasing and challenging book which will easily bear many re-readings to young children. Yvonne Cathcart's riotous, wildly colourful illustrations, often escaping their own borders in their good-humoured abundance, complement the verse beautifully. "Lulu's ukelele had two too many strings," and "Cleo's balaclava had two too may holes," says Bogart. Each line is a small perfect structure of sound and image. The rhymes are unexpected and precise, and she has fun using long four-



syllable names, like Desdemona and Arabella, which match exactly the metre and the mood. *Two Too Many* works as a book, with its seamless mixture of repetition and variety, married well to the laughing excess of the illustrations.

Two other rhyming picture books, *Purple Hair? I don't Care!* by Dianne Young, and Raffi's *Spider on the Floor*, are simply not in the same class as Bogart's book, but they bear attention because they raise a perennial problem in the discussion of children's books: popularity versus quality. Some children will probably love these books, but they are not poetry, and they aren't even, as light verse, very good. *Purple Hair* is considerably enhanced by its extraordinarily lovely watercolour illustrations by Barbara Hartmann, rich and evocative of some fairy tale medieval village. But the illustrator exceeds her subject here, for *Purple Hair* relies entirely on repetition and a pleasant twist at the end for its charm. Now repetition in rhyme is very appealing to young children. JoEllen Bogart uses it well. Dianne Young doesn't. The book's cumulative refrain, adding lines at each repetition, employs only prosaic and predictable rhymes and slang: "green/keen," "ears/tears," "blue/whoop-de-doo." It's all pretty lame stuff, and though some children, pre-critical as they are, may enjoy it, it is a weak book which cannot be redeemed either by its plot twist or its illustrations. How much better to offer them something like *Two Too Many*, which uses the same poetic techniques that children instinctively love, but does it with fresh inventiveness and a real attention to quality.

Raffi's book *Spider on the Floor*, a song lyric made into a picture book, illustrated by True Kelley, suffers from the same problem. Children who are fans of Raffi as a performer may well enjoy it, but a transcribed lyric is not necessarily a poem (as anyone who listens to the lyrics of popular songs surely knows). True Kelley valiantly tries to add an extra dimension to this slight rhyme by imagining the spider as an innocent who wreaks immense havoc. But that's not enough. If the aim, as it seems to be, is to encourage children to read by giving them material they already know in song, I'd recommend writing out the lyric yourself.

But if you want to offer a child real poetry, turn instead to Robin Skelton. His *I Am Me: Rhymes for Small* is the most exquisite book of all the seven here considered. It shows what a real poet can do with small verse forms and subtle effects; his ear is almost uncannily "true"; and he speaks in a genuine child's voice, without a trace of condescension. There is scarcely a false note in this entire small collection, and it is a real collection, as opposed to a rhyming picture book.

Such collections for the youngest readers, or even the youngest listeners, are rare, so a particularly good one like this is very welcome. It is a small book in format, and a quiet book in style, illustrated by children's line drawings which enhance its naturalistic tone. These short lyrics might be transcriptions from the mind of a three- or four-year-old, distilled by Skelton's wisdom and experience into small shining drops of wordcraft.

> Yellow eyes, yellow eyes
> Why are you fur?
> Why are you paws
> And why are you purr?

With the rhythm and the strange logic of nursery rhymes, and the same authenticity, Skelton has written a collection that will delight the youngest children, because it speaks to the realities of their experience, and bathes those small realities in magic.

In a similar vein is Sheree Fitch's *I Am Small*, also a collection of lyrics for small children. Now Fitch has some gifts as a poet, but this collection is very uneven. Like Skelton's book, it purports to speak from within the child's mind, but it generally lacks his rare insight and haunting charm. A few of these poems have spark: "When my grandpa visits his voice/ Is like thistles and his laugh/ Is a boom and a cough and a whisper." Too often, however, these verses are blank meandering musings, unenlivened by image or metre or anything resembling Skelton's startling individuality. Kim LaFave's illustrations, moreover, strike me as too soft and whimsical and cute, without the tough humour he has shown elsewhere. They are almost patronizing.

In poetry everything is magnified. If we are lucky, it enlarges the world for us, makes it loom up big and bright and strange again. In children's poetry particularly, working as it does on a smaller, though no less resonant scale, every detail is important. A poem of ten words cannot afford to waste three of them. It is not easy, and here as elsewhere good poets perhaps don't come along too often. Bogart and Skelton are good. Two out of seven ain't bad.

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HAVE IT BOTH WAYS: STORIES ORAL AND LITERATE

Next Teller. Dan Yashinsky, ed. Illus. Soozi Schlanger. Ragweed Press, 1994. 246 pages, $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-46-2.

Next Teller is a collection of 31 stories by Canadian storytellers. A contradiction, surely. It reminds me of the similar experience of people in the early 1800s when they first read the Grimms' publication of *Kinder-und Haus-Marchën*. Marchën—earthy, bawdy stories—ignored by the *upstairs* folk (but surely remembered from childhood), were part of the basement kitchen-culture of servants and children. Now read in drawing and dining rooms! In public view! Such elevation must have been disconcerting as well as pleasing—a little like children hearing their latest antics appropriated as good stories for guests. Ironically, the publication of the tales hastened their decline.

So why *print* oral stories? How can text substitute for body and voice with its innuendo, raised eyebrows, pitch and tone? Can you have it both ways—stories which are both oral and literate?

Next Teller doesn't entertain these questions. Instead, it plunges into stories about Curious Children, Tricksters, Lovers and Hauntings. The chapter headings are forwarded with a *Voiceover*—a short editorial note by Dan Yashinsky.