look in his eyes" (201). The first step towards happiness is this confusing adolescent world, Lazarus implies in *Secrets*, is to look beneath the surface when you choose your friends; the second is to have the courage to make your own decisions. As Susan succinctly puts it at the play's conclusion, "... let the cretins think whatever they want" (205).

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Reviews That Make Good Reading

The Squeeze-More-Inn. Elizabeth Ferber. Scholastic, 1995. 32 pp., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24444-2. ***Flood Fish***. Robin Eversole Illus. Sheldon Greenberg. Crown, 1995. Unpag., $20.00 cloth. ISBN 0 517 59705-5. ***Zebo and the Dirty Planet***. Kim Fernandes. Annick. 1991. $14.95., cloth. ISBN 1-55037-183-5. ***The Magic Ear***. Laura Langston. Illus. Victor Bosson. Orca Books, 1995. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-035-5. ***Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes***. Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. Caddie T'Kenye. Ronsdale Press, 1995. Unpag. ISBN 0-921870 32-9. ***Is it OK If This Monster Stays for Lunch?*** Martyn Godfrey. Illus. Susan Wilkinson. Oxford University Press, 1992. Unpag., $7.95, paper. ISBN. 0-19-540882-9. ***Little Wynne's Giggly Thing***. Laurel Dee Gugler. Illus. Russ Willms. Annick, 1995. Unpag., $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-406-0.

The following reviews are special. They are composed by people training to be teachers: people who will be responsible for choosing books for their own classrooms — for the children they will be teaching.

What the reviewers may lack in experience, they make up in expertise. They've spent an academic term preparing to write these critiques. As students in the "Access to Literacies" class I taught in the fall of 1995 in Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, the reviewers learned both how to read children's books and how to read reviews. That's the knowledge they bring to their writing.

Within the picture book section of the course, the students examined a wide variety of books for children, ranging from the elegantly simple *The Cat on the Mat* by Brian Wildsmith (Oxford) to the philosophically complex *Zoom Upstream* by Tim Wynne-Jones with illustrations by Ken Nutt (Groundwood). The students acquired their critical language both through class discussions and through careful attention to several excellent theoretical resource guides, all published by The Thimble Press: *Tell Me: Children Reading, and Talk* by Aidan Chambers; *Looking at Pictures in Picturebooks* by Jane Doonan; and *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* by Margaret Meek.

In a formal exercise I set, called "Access to Information," the students assess reviews of the kind published in guides — for parents and/or teachers — to children's books. They looked at books designed particularly to help teachers choose books for their classrooms: among them were *Choosing Children's Books*

(Pembroke) by David Booth, Larry Swartz and Meguido Zola; *Michele Landsberg's Guide to Children's Books* (Penguin) by Michele Landsberg; and *Classics for Children and Young People* (Thimble) by Margery Fisher. I've written about the exercise in *Signal* 74 (May 1994) if you are interested in exploring the rationale.

What the students discovered was that in order to write the kind of review that helped them make informed choices, they had to have a wide range of knowledge: about individual authors; about the genre; and about the way a book is put together, its coherence. They learn that plot summaries are not very helpful, nor descriptions of pictures as "colourful" or "detailed," and that throwaway phrases such "suitable for children of all ages" are not helpful either.

The new books sent to the students in the class by *CCL* for review enabled the students to try out their newly acquired skills in a very practical way. One of the things all the reviewers notice in their analyses of the books is the coherence between pictures, texts, and the "point" of the story. If any element is out of balance with the others, the book suffers. In the group of books reviewed here, all the relationships are carefully considered. I think the reviewers have done brilliantly. These are the kinds of reviews I want to read, the kinds of reviews that help me make informed assessments of books. Though I've helped with the editing on the final versions, the reviews are as the students, in groups of three, wrote them. Judge for yourself.

Kimberly Corbett, Ann D. Inscho and Mary Beth O'Brien reviewed *The Squeeze-More-Inn*, a book whose elements they found to be as harmonious as those in a perfect summer holiday.

> The title of Elizabeth Ferber's second book for children, *The Squeeze-More-Inn*, reminds the reader of summer vacations with the entire family squeezed into a small cottage (or an inn with one of those awful punning names), squeezing as much as possible into a short holiday weekend. Even the "More-Inn" part of the title is a play on words: the name of the protagonist of the story is "Maureen," a young girl who invites her best friend to spend the weekend with her at the family cottage. The two girls experience the summer delights of swimming until their skin wrinkles, building sand castles, and exploring for treasures from the sea: all the warm fuzzies of happy childhood holidays.
>
> The illustrations are like snap-shot memories. The watercolour drawings melt into indistinct outlines, suggesting that they might have been made by a young child. Ferber's talent as a greeting card illustrator and cartoonist contributes to the warm feel of the pictures. The book is child-centred, but safe, focusing on what is important to a child: having fun at the beach on a summer weekend.

Flood Fish is a book that made a deep impression on the reviewers Kelly Hay, Matthew LeBrun and Kenda Mitten.

> Where do the flood fish come from? When the riverbeds of the arid Australian outback suddenly fill up with rain, the water magically brings with it a flood of huge, motley-coloured fish. Everyone has their own theory about where the fish come from, but no one knows for certain. Not even science has the answer to this puzzling natural phenomenon.
>
> Perhaps "the gum trees heavy with rain drop their slim, fish-shaped leaves," or maybe "the moon sows fish eggs when she cries on the nights of high water."

Wherever the flood fish come from "when the puddles dry up ... [T]hey leave no bones."

If readers dig deeper, they will find that the mystery of the flood fish parallels the mystery of life. If one believes in the primordial soup theory of the evolution of life from the sea then *Flood Fish* is quite like a pre-historical family album of the human race. On the other hand, perhaps, as the young narrator naively suggests, the fish have mystically metamorphosed out of rocks and leaves. Or, as the grandfather suggests, the fish eggs lie hidden in caves, deep underground, "like old pearls" waiting in the mud to be brought to life. All scenarios are possible.

The large double-spread illustrations, unlimited by borders, extend into the landscape of the readers' minds. The rich, acrylic paint is spread thinly, so the grain of the canvas shows through, giving all the landscapes a touchable quality. The cool, blue water contrasts with the burnt umber of the desert. The story is literally "cooled off" when the rain comes.

Flood Fish is about renewal and rebirth. The image of the fish eggs is echoed throughout the book: in the underwater bubbles, the dew drops, the moon, and the water itself. All are perfect circles, all endlessly re-create themselves. Like the flood fish.

The textured, multilayered quality of the review of *Flood Fish* testifies to how much there is worth saying about the book. The review of *Zebo and the Dirty Planet* by Deanna Foley, Wendy Flynn, and Jill Maxwell, is a much shorter review, suggesting, I think, that, though they like the book, it has less to say.

Have you ever seen a dirty planet? Hop on board the extra-terrestrial ark with stowaways Amy and Andrew, as Zebo takes them on a three-dimensional journey. This "green book" uses the natural hues of earthy reds, blues and greens to depict the state of the environment. The healthy new land is rendered in clear, saturated colour, while the earth has the muddied tones of a polluted planet. Fernandes has constructed her pictures out of Fimo (the modelling material children often use for jewellery making) so that they have a moulded quality to them.

Zebo and the Dirty Planet is a Noah's ark story for an age threatened by environmental disasters. The endangered species (all faithfully rendered in the pictures) are saved by a space-ship ark. In the event that a space ark is unavailable for rescue, the book ends with a helpful list of recycling tips.

The Magic Ear, reviewed by Sherri-Lynn Butt, Mandy Copp and Susan Maxwell, is an obviously beautiful book. But is it saying anything?

The Magic Ear is supposed to be a retelling of a Japanese Legend, but it is really more like the popular North American versions of *The Little Mermaid* or *Sleeping Beauty*. The text is mainly a vehicle for the exquisite illustrations.

If Hoderi (the hero) was so "poor" and "honest," how did he manage to seize the most prized possession of Neriza's underwater kingdom and purchase the hand of the rainbow princess? The morals are puzzling. The wealthiest noblemen are idolized, dirty ragged peasants are scorned, and women rescued from serpents are won with lumps of gold.

Hoderi's supposed courage, honour and integrity are gift-wrapped in Victor Bosson's harvest-toned watercolour and pencil crayon illustrations, each picture

boxed in an origami frame. If you give *The Magic Ear* as a Christmas gift, it will look great under the tree — but not on your book shelf.

While *The Magic Ear* was praised for its pictures, but not for its text, Beverly McLaughlin, Beverly White and Valerie Anderson, the reviewers of *Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes* were unmoved by anything about the book.

> Sue Anne Alderson's fourteenth book, *Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes* is neither as poetic nor as lively as the "Bonnie" books which secured her reputation. There, Fiona Garrick's black-ink illustrations for Bonnie, flatter the comedy of the story. In Alderson's new book, Caddie T'Kenye's smudged pencil drawings do nothing to bring the characters to life.
>
> *Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes* is about a boy named "Lots of Boxes," and the hardships he must endure in moving to a new place. The "boxed" characters, "Lots of Boxes," "Sky-Climber," and "Easy as Pie" have little appeal in an overworked text partnered with lifeless pencil drawings. The characters meet "Thundering Dunderblusses," a "Wandering Blue-Eyed Glumfy," and a zesty "Thronk" but they are all names without content. The drawings bleed colour from the text, leaving the reader feeling empty. "Lots of Boxes" is empty too. His hollow, black-blotted eyes match his empty character. His move across town was a bad move, a boring move with limited appeal and few surprises.

Mary Burton, Susan McCurdy and Chin-Er Yang, the reviewers of *Is it OK If this Monster Stays For Lunch?*, also found themselves in the uncomfortable position of reviewing a book they didn't like, even though it was by well-known author. It seems unlikely that Martyn Godfrey will be as successful as a picture-book author as he is as an author of books for older children.

> *Is it OK If This Monster Stays for Lunch?* depicts the experience of a little girl adapting to the hurried world of the modern family. When Megan (the protagonist) is deprived of her family's attention, she reverts into the world of her imaginary monster friends. But the monsters are pale shades of another monster who comforts a lonely girl: the gorilla in Anthony Browne's *Gorilla*. Godfrey's careless text doesn't help. Puzzlingly, Megan is an apparently happy child who runs, hops, and rides through the days of the week with her monster friends — who have about as much emotional resonance as Barney the purple dinosaur. *Is it OK If This Monster Stays For Lunch?* is a frivolous excursion by Martyn Godfrey into the world of picture books.

I couldn't end this cluster of reviews on that down note, so I've placed at the end, the most radical book reviewed in this group. It too is about a girl adapting to the "hurried world" of family life, but the results are better. The reviewers of *Little Wynne's Giggly Thing*, Melissa Adams, Mandi Shannon and John Knoll, noticed almost from the beginning that this book revels in surprises. They like it a lot. So do I.

> *Little Wynne's Giggly Thing* is a no nonsense story. The logical, linear text is juxtaposed with the distorted perspective of the nonsense illustrations. The gender boundaries are bent in the contrast between the soft, round shapes and the angular sharp lines.
>
> At the centre of this story's intrigue is the post-nuclear family: "Who are these people?" Gender roles as family relations are deliberately distorted. This is a

family story, but don't expect Ma and Pa Kettle! Russ Willm's illustrations offer a clever blurring of gender and family roles: unisex clothing and androgynous body types. Little Wynne seeks the approval of "her" family, a gender ambiguous bunch named Molly, Kim and Jeri.

How does Little Wynne fit into this family? The parent/child roles are as obscured as the gender roles. The only evidence the reader has that Wynne is the child in this menage is her struggle for adult acceptance.

The text overtly tells the story of Wynne's longing for acceptance, while the subtext speaks of creation, repression and release of emotions. When Wynne's inventions are rejected, they are "repressed" to the closet, only to be let out to the laughter and celebration at the story's end.

An upbeat note to end the reviews!

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