

My next suggestion is more problematic, and it relates to the only place in the book where I am troubled. Much of the section on Native legends has been retained from the earlier edition, and contains a kind of inherent (de)valuation clearly not intended. References to Native stories as "rough-hewn," "crude," and as having "intrinsic deficiencies of artistry" (187, 189), may have passed invisibly before the eyes of readers in 1975, but they do not now. Not in the light of critics like Walter Onga and Sally Price. In *Orality and literacy* (Methuen, 1982), Ong teaches us to use the term "oral" instead of "pre-literate," and to unthink our literate biases about features like repetition. In *Primitive art in civilized places* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), Price exposes our cultural biases on issues like originality and connoisseurship, and shows how we thoughtlessly impose our value systems on other people's stories. I know Saltman and Egoff have already done a lot of critical reading for *The new republic of childhood*, and it shows in the shift away from a New critical bias. Will there be more evidence of feminist and other forms of post-structuralist theory in the next edition? And more about publishing and editors and anecdotal gossip on some of the texts? I hope so. I'm looking forward to it.

In the meantime, what marks *The new republic of childhood* is the literacy, sensitivity and erudition of its authors. Saltman and Egoff not only tell us where we've been, but help us figure out where we are going. Everyone interested in Canadian Children's Literature ought to buy a copy.

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MUNSCH: CHAOTIC COMEDY AND FEEBLE PHILOSOPHY

Giant: or waiting for the Thursday boat. Robert Munsch. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick, 1989. Unpag., \$14.95 \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-071-5, 1-55037-070-7; **Something good.** Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick, 1990. Unpag., \$12.95 \$4.95. cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-099-5, 1-55037-100-2.

Like Robert Munsch's earlier books, *Something good* and *Giant: or waiting for the Thursday boat* create comedy by mixing together exaggerated turmoil, incompetent adults, and children who solve adult problems. Both develop themes of identity and acceptance, but they differ significantly in form. The first is formulaic Munsch, familiar domestic farce in which both adults and children will recognize their own foibles. The second, like a *A promise is a promise*, bases the plot on folklore, not modern events. Although graced with Gilles Tibo's whimsical illustrations, it is less a refreshing change for a writer whose

books are increasingly too predictable than a confirmation of Munsch's serious limitations.

Something good begins with the common tribulations of grocery shopping with children. Chaos erupts when Tyya, clamoring for "good food," fills her grocery cart with ice cream and, later, chocolate bars. After her frustrated father – Munsch himself in the illustrations – finally orders her to "stand here and DON'T MOVE," Tyya obeys, remaining rigidly motionless. Thinking her a doll, a clerk slaps a price tag on her nose, and two adults try to buy her. Naturally, they all declare her to be "the nicest doll I have ever seen," stressing the loveable nature of the child who has annoyed her father.

The conclusion quantifies love and assigns it a definite monetary value, but the light tone makes this warmly amusing rather than crassly materialistic. After some mayhem, the father faces a cashier, who demands payment because Tyya still sports her price tag. The father pays after Tyya asks, "Daddy, don't you think I'm worth \$29.95?" Tyya then redefines the term that caused trouble, saying that her father finally bought "something good."

This is a commercial book with notable limitations. Its humour is forced. Its theme is ragged: the junk food issue simply disappears, and Tyya, inconsistently, holds a huge bag of sugary treats in the last picture. Furthermore, Michael Martchenko's picture of a lady knocking over oranges contains significantly more lettuces and apples. Nevertheless, the book has some merit. Martchenko's pictures deepen the theme of love by suggesting that the daughters, who appear racially different from the parents, are adopted. Furthermore, the tale broaches questions of identity, acceptance, and love without sinking into the sticky depths of sentimentality.

Giant also is about identity and also contains a child resolving a dispute between adults. It tells of a giant who wants to fight God for ordering St. Patrick to rid Ireland of snakes, elves, and giants, all of which he loves. Informed that God will arrive by the Thursday boat, the giant goes to the sea but does not recognize God, who arrives as a little girl in a small fishing boat. Later, when he follows St. Patrick to heaven and continues his destructive habits by throwing down church bells, a parallel scene establishes that St. Patrick is equally ignorant of God's identity. In heaven's smallest house, they finally meet God, the little girl, surrounded by elves, snakes, and giants. God helps them to accept each other's identity: "Saints are for hanging church bells and giants are for tearing them down. That's just the way it is."

Giant is controversial, some people objecting to the portrayal of God as a little girl. This book is troublesome, but not for that reason. One does not have to be a proponent of "thealogy," the study of a divine female principle, to see that Munsch has used a potentially brilliant device that need not offend anyone. The Bible, after all, speaks of those with eyes who yet do not see. The scene in which the giant fails to recognize God demonstrates both his spiritual ignorance and God's mysterious identity. Nevertheless, when Munsch turns

God into a sandbox superintendent who arbitrates a dispute by getting the combatants to accept uncritically each other's habits, he gives to a conventional theme, one quite acceptable in "realistic" stories, a perverse theological twist. He presents, that is, a perniciously deterministic universe. God declares both giant and saint "perfect." The perfection, however, consists of performing pointless tasks that they cannot help performing. Furthermore, base desires, the giant's destructive tantrums, receive divine approval as essential elements of identity. Munsch turns away from this theme to make this a *pourquoi* tale that explains shooting stars as the bells the giant throws from heaven. By placing Pandemonium in Heaven, however, he obliterates distinctions between good and evil, and he denies moral development and responsibility, creating only a demonic parody of the wholesome philosophy of accepting differences.

Munsch habitually creates humour through scenes of chaos and destruction, and he resolves conflicts by falling back on sage, approved axioms, such as acceptance of each individual's identity. In *Something good* the formula is threadbare, but the tale should amuse those fans who want another book "just like the last one." *Giant*, on the other hand, exposes Munsch's weakness as an artist: he fails to understand that his formulaic "I'm okay, you're okay" resolutions are not always suitable. *Giant* could have marked an aesthetic advance for Munsch; instead, it is a thematic, philosophic, and moral catastrophe.

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