

## MINI-REVIEWS

**Putting up with Mitchell: My Vancouver scrapbook.** Sarah Ellis. Illus. Barbara Wood. Brighthouse Press, 1989. 25 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-921304-07-2.

In *Putting up with Mitchell*, Brighthouse Press has produced the perfect souvenir of a family trip to Vancouver – a mock scrapbook of a young girl's visit with her Granny. In it, Elizabeth makes note of her impressions of all the sights they visit, and of the antics of her exasperating four-year-old brother Mitchell. Author Sarah Ellis adroitly avoids the pitfall of the geography textbook approach ("Billy and Suzy Visit Tokyo") by getting the voice of the big sister just right: "Mitchell bought a box of Cracker Jack, and the prize was a kazoo. He kazoo'd all day. People looked at us. . . . I wonder what it would be like to be an only child." Granny, a robust, energetic woman who has no trouble keeping up with her two grandchildren, is drawn without any tinge of liberal condescension to old people.

Illustrator Barbara Wood's alternating ink and watercolour illustrations cover the full gamut of Vancouver sights, from the Art Gallery to Stanley Park, with close attention to architectural detail and a terrific sense of humour. My favourite shows Mitchell at the aquarium grinning weirdly into the camera with Bogsmirt, his stuffed dinosaur, on his head.

**A story of Jean.** Susan Gaitskell. Illus. Laurie Lafrance. Oxford University Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540736-9.

Jean Little is something of an icon in Canadian children's literature circles, but I'm not convinced this makes her childhood a fit subject for a picture book, a format normally aimed at preschoolers. The theme of the different child, rejected by peers but possessing unusual gifts or sensitivity, is best treated in junior novels (like many of Little's), where it can be explored in depth. Middle readers can consider the issues of peer acceptance and conformity, which are meaningless to preschoolers.

In *A story of Jean*, the heroine is shunned by her classmates because of her storytelling and her blindness. One night, after running home to escape a classmate's taunts, she is befriended by an apparition on the windowsill, a "girl in blue-flecked glasses," who takes her for rides on her star and encourages her to return to school to tell her stories to the sensitive children who will listen to them.

Of course, the best picture books – Sendak's work is the outstanding example – are layered with meaning, much of which is lost on child readers. So

it is not a problem if children fail to see that the girl in blue glasses is Jean's alter ego. But a story must also work on a superficial level. Because *A story of Jean* only operates abstractly and symbolically, it lacks impact. Neither Jean's antagonists at school nor the children who like her stories have particular names or personalities.

Laurie Lafrance's illustrations, painted in bold, broad strokes and equally bold colours to convey strong emotions, are inconsistent. Jean, who looks like a typical chubby-cheeked, blond-haired schoolgirl on the first page, resembles a teenager on the second, and an elderly Chinese woman persecuted by a group of teenage boys (in elementary school?) on the third.

**Spike Chiseltooth.** Deirdre Kessler. Illus. P. John Burden. Ragweed Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$12.95 \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-920304-99-0, 0-920304-98-2.

Like many animal stories, *Spike Chiseltooth* follows a well-worn plotline. With his last penny, Karl buys a pet rabbit, only to be commanded by his parents to get rid of it – fast! Karl abandons the pet outside the door of Mr. Gribble, his upstairs neighbour, whose gruff exterior masks a heart readily softened by the new pet. What is intended as a humorous and heartwarming story, however, falls flat because the author's intentions are overly obvious. Even Mr. Gribble's name is an awkward attempt to underscore his curmudgeonliness. Spike is called "she" to balance all those male animals that dominate the world of animal fiction – a laudable attempt, if the reader can be found who will buy "Spike" as feminine.

The humour is strained. Where is the wit in Mr. Gribble's response to the papergirl, "Grumble, grumble. Two-fifty, two-seventy-five. . . have a grumble day"?

P. John Burden's robust, cartoon-like illustrations are, however, very funny – especially the details of Spike's depredations (the chewed elastic on Mr. Gribble's undershorts, the frayed end of a rug, the gnawed corner of a door). Burden experiments with a variety of approaches – bullseye inserts, "photos" held up by thumbtacks. However, he is not always technically adept or consistent; Karl on page 31 looks several years older than Karl on page 5.

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