

Manuel's writing is finely crafted with loving attention to the great design principles of unity and variation. Each chapter of the book ends with a refrain-like scrap of dialogue, in which the speakers and the topic vary, but the form remains the same. Touches of colour flicker through the pages — e.g., the pink of cherries in icing, pink lemonade, and princess garments; the black and white of a puppy in soapsuds, a cat, piano keys; and the yellows of gold coins, dandelion chains, and Megan Canary's surname. Images of swirling and twirling add energy, and the references to various imaginary kinds of cherry pits (e.g., giggle pits, spinach pits) serve as symbols of Dagny's fertile imagination. Even spitting appears in amusing and acceptable forms (spider's spit, spitting cherry pits). Manuel's delight in sound is contagious as the reader relishes the repetition of delicious phrases such as *lickety-split*, *splattering of pizazz*, *not one pinch*, *tickled pink*, and *double-dip*.

This is an entertaining story of friendship, imagination, and working together to solve problems.

Catherine Simpson's second picture book, Sailor: The Hangashore Newfoundland Dog, was published by Tuckamore Books. She lives with her husband and son in Lewisporte, Newfoundland.

Double Threat Talent Survives (barely) Designer Disservice

The Strongest Man This Side of Cremona. Georgia Graham. Red Deer College P, 1998 (Northern Lights Books for Children). Unpag. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-182-9.

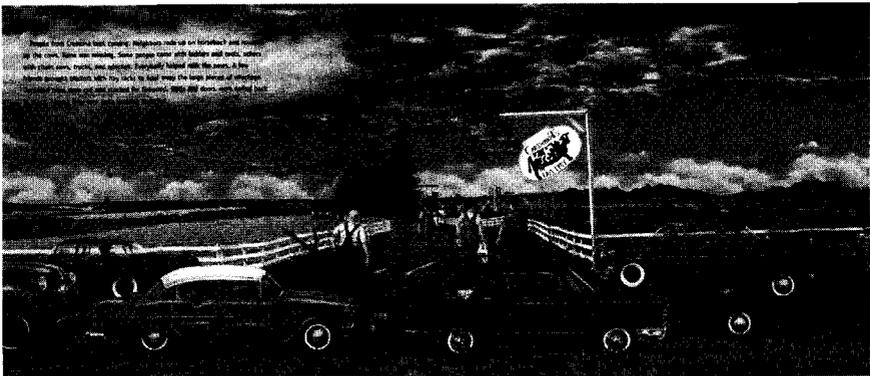


Illustration from *The Strongest Man This Side of Cremona*

The Strongest Man This Side of Cremona by Georgia Graham delivers a message for urbanites terrorized by potential Y2K disasters: make friends with a farmer, and further, learn an important lesson from the rural community. Graham considers the definition of “strength” and gently reveals how young Matthew re-evaluates his understanding after his solid world is blown apart by nature’s whims.

While Graham’s vocabulary is not particularly adventurous, her description of the tornado is vivid enough, and the story’s instruction is served well by her richly coloured and deeply detailed images. So, supported by strong art and sturdy prose, how could such a book go even slightly askew? Well, just because Georgia Graham authored and illustrated this production doesn’t mean she also was responsible for its design. I suggest that obligation lies with Kunz and Associates and I further suggest that they are guilty of designer disservice: a good designer makes a story effortless to read. But for page after page with few exceptions, *Cremona* becomes simply too hard to read.

Stature, style and unwise competition compose the trio of sins. Not only is the text size puny (especially the x-height), but I’ve seen friendlier fonts out of Revenue Canada. Even a point or two up and a slightly heavier weight could have armed these worthy words better instead of abandoning them to an unfair battle with encroaching and massively distracting visuals. When such an ironic imbalance sacrifices readability, a great literary faux pas has been committed. A sensitive yet firm art editor would have chosen the font more wisely and encouraged the illustrator to smooth and simplify her textures (while retaining the appropriate tornado traits) into softer, plainer but still rich areas of colour and tone against which the words would happily rest.

Additionally, with some simplification in the distant foothills, the relentless aspect to Graham’s realism could be tempered while all the middle and foreground would be enhanced: the weather-beaten wagon, the madly hairy collie and its floppy, storm-tossed ears, the looming hugeness of cows, sinewy arms and sinewy cabbages — all would remain impressively as Graham’s visual testament.

As I speculate upon how Graham-the-artist could have learned a lesson on select simplification from Graham-the-writer, I must wonder how closely the text-first, pictures-second production formula was followed. For had it properly been adhered to, Graham would not have been placed in the strange and unnecessary situation of competing with herself and so weakening her own project.

As an addendum, it is good to see Georgia Graham marketing at the back of the book her impressive skills in a limited-edition print series of her cows or cabbages. “Why not?” I say as I tip my hat off to her savvy and the book’s message of community spirit — both are more greatly needed on the

Canadian publishing scene today.

Robin Baird Lewis, an established children's book illustrator (Red is Best, et al.), inoculates herself regularly with heavy doses of P.G. Wodehouse and Hunter S. Thompson.

Learning to Swim

Stella, Star of the Sea. Marie Louise Gay. Groundwood/Douglas and McIntyre, 1999. 32 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-337-4.

This beautiful book is discovered, like one perfect shell, with a shock of pleasure. Deceptively simple prose and sly humour spin a timeless tale of siblings at the seashore. Young or old, readers have all been a Stella trying to share something loved with someone loved; or a Sam, overwhelmed by the world's complexity.

The text's comforting message is both concrete and metaphorical. Stella says star(fish) fell from the sky; when Sam points out they might have drowned, Stella explains "they learned to swim." Sam will follow suit, in the water and in life.

Whimsical illustrations employ a horizon line which suggests the immensity of the world viewed from a child's perspective. Shimmering colours hold the promise of a perfect summer's day.

Troon Harrison teaches creative writing and is the author of eight picture books and a YA novel.

Harper Winslow's Inspirational Writing

A Fly Named Alfred. Don Trembath. Orca, 1997. 144 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-083-5. *A Beautiful Place on Yonge Street.* Don Trembath. Orca, 1998. 192 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-121-1.

"Learn from me. Let my story inspire you": A pompous young writer speaks these words in Don Trembath's newest novel, *A Beautiful Place on Yonge Street*.