Boys With Toys and the Marketing of Children's Literature

Matthew and the Midnight Pilot. Allen Morgan.Illus. Michael Martchenko. Stoddart Kids, 1997. Unpag. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5852-6. ***Matthew and the Midnight Ball Game*** Allen Morgan. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Stoddart Kids, 1997. Unpag. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5853-4.

Repetition is a crucial part of the writing and reception of children's literatures. Children who are at all encouraged to be sensitive to language depend on repetition and contrastive variation for the pleasure and learning afforded them in literature. But repetition is, most unfortunately, also a key element in the marketing of children's books based upon serial characters like Matthew, the überboy, Franklin, the anthropomorphized turtle, the ever-game Hardy boys, and so forth. In the case of the Matthew books there is a clear sense of pandering to repetition as a marketing principle that gets books off the shelves and into weary parents' households. Symptomatic of this, are the blurbs for both these books, with their exclamatory "Matthew is back! And this time he's ... [fill in the appropriate book concept/authorial pitch]." The formula is tiresome but part of the larger picture, which involves the marketing for a "brand new TV Series soon to be aired on the Family Channel!"

Allen Morgan has produced sensitive work in the past. His *Jessica Moffat's Silver Locket* deals effectively with issues of family, mortality, and remembrance. But these Matthew books were upsetting for the way in which they so obviously cater to a larger strategic design that involves a particular market (young boys), the ingenuous blurring of fantasy and reality (always an issue when developing a sense of literary culture) through the familiar device of the dreams that enable Matthew's somnambulant fantasies, and promoting a simplistic formula that ensures a market niche (not always the way to entice cynical parents looking to stop the onslaught of some of the more egregious aspects of mass culture from overtaking the household).

With these two latest Matthew books, the pattern becomes clearer: boys are the centre of action in this universe, particularly if it involves adventure or sport — women and girls are excluded from this scenario except for brief appearances where they don't "understand" or where they're vaguely diminishing of their sons ("My mother says I am [a turkey], sometimes"); sports and boys with toys rule; and when in need of a dash of fantasy, anthropomorphize away (both books have their epiphanic moments signalled by the appearance of birds, either flying airplanes or playing on baseball teams). The formula is furthered by the almost complete lack of family context — namely, you can't play sports or have an adventure in the context of the family and both sports and adventure involve midnight escape from the house and mother's bedroom surveillance. If the oedipal resonances of all this haven't set your readerly antennae on high alert the lack of sensitivity to matters of narrative cliché and so forth should. Do we really need another "boy" character who fronts as a marketing prop for the Toronto Blue Jays (morphed into the "Toronto Turkeys")? Do we really want another writer

engaging unquestioningly with one of the nadirs of mass culture (professional sports)? And do we really want to teach children that adventure is devoid of family context (not to say that it can't be)?

No doubt some readers will answer these questions in the affirmative and these books belong on their shelves. More cynical readers will want to avoid these books out of the basic principle that children, if they are to develop in ways that give them some basic tools to fend off the intrusions of marketing culture (and the dull mind-clutter it produces), would do well to read authors and books that make some small effort to produce a fantasy world that does not rely on tiresome clichés ("Boys, after all, will be boys!"). (For instance, Peter Sís's wonderful book on his father's adventure in Tibet and the adventure of his discovery of the story itself, *Tibet Through the Red Box*, evokes a welter of qualitatively superior visual and literary resonances that make the Matthew books read like the backs of cereal boxes.) This is not to say that clichés themselves cannot be useful. A group of children to whom I read these stories on several occasions anticipated most of the moves made by Morgan, and moved on to parodying and inverting them with no small delight. Matthew's cheesy smile when caught by his mother listening to a baseball game while wearing a baseball cap in a bed surrounded by the detritus of fandom (a scene aptly caught by illustrator Michael Martchenko) inspired a canny routine on bad faith, disobedience, and the conventions associated with both.

Children are wildly more inventive and subversive than Morgan would have them be. The Matthew books envisage the imaginatively sterile world of suburban middle-America (though clearly depicted as occurring in Toronto via the visual stratagem of the CN Tower, itself a troubling enough feature of this "Canadian" book), in which affluence, technology, banality, and mass culture reign, even in children's (read boys') predictable fantasies.

Daniel Fischlin *teaches Renaissance literature and literary theory at the University of Guelph and goes home to learn from his three daughters, Hannah, Zoë and Esmé.*

The Immigrant and a Sense of Belonging

The Boy in the Attic. Paul Yee. Illus. Gu Xiong. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1998. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-330-7. ***The Red Corduroy Shirt***. Joseph Kertes. Illus. Peter Perko. Stoddart, 1998. 32 pp. $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-30664. ***A Gift for Gita***. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story, 1998. Unpag. $12.95 cloth, $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-12-6.