

Two Good Books of Poetry for Children

From the Top of a Grain Elevator. Barbara Nickel. Illus. Kathy Thiessen. Sandcastle (Beach Holme), 1999. 66 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-397-3. *How Do You Wrestle a Goldfish?* Diane Dawber. Illus. Pat Wilkinson. Borealis, 1997. 87 pp. \$24.95, \$11.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-8887-153-8, 0-8887-155-4.

Barbara Nickel's young adult novel, *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart*, was shortlisted for the Mr. Christie Award, the Red Cedar Award, and the Geoffrey Bilson Award. She has won the Pat Lowther Award for the best collection of poems by a woman poet in Canada. Her collection for young readers is beautifully organized: each section is built on a season and opens with a view of a slough at that time of year. This is a book steeped in the world of the prairies, so a note with the opening poem, "The Slough Cycle: Spring" tells us that "in the Canadian prairie province *slough* is pronounced *sloo*." The collection has a short glossary of Western Canadian terms, like "caragana" and "The Battle of Batoche." There is also an Author's Note that explains her small town Saskatchewan background and her use of a wide variety of poetic forms.

The variety is impressive. She provides shaped poems, like the title poem, which is in the pattern of a grain elevator (she wants to commemorate the vanishing elevator), and she is at ease with the *tanka* and the sonnet. Her adult collection, *The Gladys Elegies*, was a work of stylistic virtuosity. In this collection she shows that she can write for the young with virtuosity and clarity. She never falls into trite rhymes, and she uses various forms of half-rhyme with ease. Along with the shaped poems, her poem about leaves, "The Chase," conveys the scuttling leaves with visual playfulness in the manner of e. e. cummings. And "Frog Chorus Round Song," a poem for three voices, arranges its stanzas in a circle around an illustration of a dugout, the Western Canadian equivalent of a pond. The collection is remarkably experimental but never obscure.

The poems give us a vivid tour of the Prairie landscape, with its caraganas, saskatoon berries and minus 40 temperatures. The sensory richness of the book makes it universal: it will make sense in St. John's and Victoria because the writing recreates the experience. Of course, hockey practice is a universal Canadian experience, even if going trick-or-treating in a snowsuit is not. The excellent illustrations by Kathy Thiessen are in line/aquatint. They have a slightly old-fashioned look to them which fits the commemorative atmosphere of Nickel's poetry. Thiessen has chosen to use details from pictures along with the full pictures, an interesting way to suggest motifs or focus on the interesting images.

Diane Dawber is not a virtuoso but her style is adequate for her poems, which are mostly about the humorous and quirky aspects of childhood. Her book, like Nickel's, is well-organized. The sections are "Word Worlds," "My World," "The Bigger World," and "Other Worlds." She looks at haircuts, sibling rivalry, grossing out the sisters, walking "Paddy the Piddling Pup" and other events of a young person's life. There are poems from the point of view of both sexes and the intended reader seems around grade eight. The book undertakes a few deeper subjects: Dawber has a long poem about the bones of Lucy, the Australopithecus fossil, and she deals with grief and the difficulty of communicat-

ing with parents. But the emphasis is on humour, sometimes the rueful kind, sometimes slapstick. The line drawings by Pat Wilkinson are appropriately cartoon-like. Dawber's book is likely to have more immediate appeal, but the reader who is fond of words will find much to return to in Nickel's fine verbal artistry.

Bert Almon teaches English at the University of Alberta where he was named a Killam Annual Professor for 1999-2000. He has published eight collections of poetry.

Literary and Didactic Aims

There's a Mouse in My House. Sheree Fitch. Illus. Leslie E. Watts. Doubleday, 1997. Unpag. \$18.95, \$8.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-385-25561-6, 0-385-25706-6. *If I Were the Moon.* Sheree Fitch. Illus. Leslie E. Watts. Doubleday, 1999. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25744-9. *No Dragons for Tea: Fire Safety for Kids (and Dragons).* Jean Pendziwol. Illus. Martine Goubault. Kids Can, 1999. Unpag. \$14.95, \$5.95, cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55074-569-7, 1-55074-571-9.

A common pattern in children's books is the intrusion of an animal into the cosy domestic world of the child: order and security are threatened but not often seriously (consider *The Cat in the Hat*). Sheree Fitch uses this situation in her very successful books, *Sleeping Dragons All Around*, *Monkeys All Around*, and *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen!* Her latest contribution to the genre is *There's a Mouse in My House*, in which a homeless mouse and her aged mum take refuge in a boy's house. The mother is a believer in nonviolence, but ironically makes an exception for mice. She wants the boy to act as exterminator, but of course a peaceful resolution is found. The mouse asks for three last wishes: a glass of pop, a piece of cheese, and a chance to tell its story. The creature arouses compassion by telling the tragic events of its life — its father was killed by cats. It even traces its family back to Confederation times and had a "grand'mère from Old Québec." This is definitely a Canadian book: one scene even has a mouse version of the Canadian flag, with a mouse standing in for the maple leaf. Fitch has become a little ponderous, perhaps because she has overworked the basic animal-intruder narrative in her earlier books and feels a need to add some literary allusions: her mouse retells "Hickory Dickory Dock" and "Three Blind Mice." Indeed, the mouse is named Scheherazade and offers to tell a new story every night, creating a kind of rodent Arabian Nights. The text isn't as verbally extravagant as Fitch's earlier works in "utterachure" (her coinage for orally-based children's books), and the rhymes are often forced rather than zestful, though "Copenhagen" rhymed with "station wagon" is droll. This is still an enjoyable book, with a lesson in tolerance (that staple of modern children's books). Leslie Watts is Fitch's best illustrator to date, with egg tempera pictures that abound in detail and wit. Watts is especially good at conveying the effects of artificial light.

In *If I Were the Moon*, Fitch has tried writing a lullaby. The book is very short