

struggling with the advance of Ernie's Alzheimer's disease.

Jess attempts to define her changing relationships with her mother and Brian and to understand Ernie's illness. She receives mixed messages as to whether she is child or adult and alternates uneasily between these roles. Heavily foreshadowed, her greatest fears are strongly sketched in the opening chapters. Still haunted by the desertion of her father, she carries a makeshift "survival kit" in her school bag and has hideous nightmares about being swept down a raging river, which seems to represent loss of control. Seeing Ernie, who has been forbidden to drive, setting off in his camper, Jess accompanies him and is soon stranded in the Northern Alberta wilderness on the banks of the Athabasca river. She must care for herself and Ernie while coping with a bear, a spring storm, and Ernie's Alzheimer's. Ernie is drawn with heartbreaking verisimilitude — a once proud, capable, and loving man losing his memory and self with chaotic speed. The pity as well as the anger, fear, and denial his deterioration awakes in those who care for him is powerfully achieved. Eventually, Jess is forced to take Ernie down the raging river to safety in a flimsy dingy.

The second half of the novel alternates between detailed and tautly suspenseful accounts of Jess's struggles and the rescue effort. No longer seen through the lens of Jess's hostility, Brian becomes a sympathetic and capable character as he struggles to come to terms with the new social realities of adolescence and to forge a relationship with his father, while hoping it is not too late for him to reinvent his relationships with Jess and Ernie. When Jess and Ernie are rescued, new insights and resolutions are achieved by all the characters and Jess feels that she has conquered her fears and learned that life is "about more than surviving."

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From the Forests of Fairy Tale and Fable

Gogol's Coat. Cary Fagan. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Tundra, 1998. 32 pp. cloth \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-429-0. *Lady Kaguya's Secret: A Japanese Tale*. Illus. Jirina Marton. Annick, 1997. 48 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-441-9. *The Parrot*. Illus. Laszlo & Raffaella Gal. Groundwood, 1997. 32 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 0-88899-287-4. *The Walking Stick*. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Annouchka Gravel Galouchko. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 24 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3101-6.

For Canadian children, these four picture books open a window on an exotic world of strangeness or otherness. All four are handsome books, executed with loving attention to detail. Two are retellings of traditional folk tales. *The Parrot* is based on a classic Italian folk tale about the power of storytelling itself while *Lady Kaguya's Secret* adapts a 1000-year-old Japanese tale of forbidden love between a mortal and an immortal. *Gogol's Coat* reworks Nikolai Gogol's famous short story "The Over-

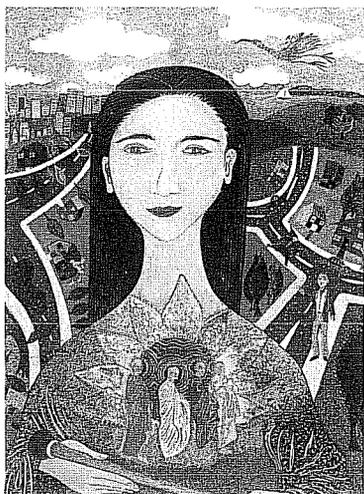


Illustration from
The Walking Stick

coat," converting the bleak Russian narrative about the theft of a magnificent coat into a happier story of loss and recovery. *The Walking Stick*, the only one of these four books not based on an already existing source, tells a multi-generational story in which a young boy's memories of growing up in Vietnam near the temple of Buddha are kept alive through years of emigration and settlement in Canada, and are passed on to his daughter and granddaughter.

Of these four books, I find *Lady Kaguya's Secret* visually the most stunning, starting with the endpapers depicting a bamboo forest and rendered in shades of emerald green. Described by the press release as "35 haunting, luminous paintings," the illustrations, which vary in size from long thin panels to full page illustrations, use jewel-like colours of magentas and greens and cobalt blues to convey Japanese scenes. In this story, a childless bamboo cutter living at the foot of Mount Fuji finds a tiny baby girl in the bamboo forest. She grows up to be a great beauty, courted by many suitors, all of whom she refuses one after the other until the Emperor himself asks to marry her.

Whereas Jirina Marton's intense but stylized illustrations suit the bitter-sweet story of lovers from different worlds who must separate, the illustrations for *The Walking Stick* almost vibrate in a pointillist display of exuberant golds and greens and reds depicting Buddhists monks and Temple, Vietnamese flying dragon kites, and American bombs falling on rice paddies and burning villages, and later Canadian city-scapes. My son, to whom I showed these four books, said about *The Walking Stick's* illustrations, "Absolutely incredible. I would get this book just to look at the pictures," although he had reservations about the somewhat didactic flavour of the text. The story, which is about a family's journey and a granddaughter's return, is held together by the image of the teak walking stick, found on the floor of a Vietnam forest, carried across the ocean to Canada and brought back by the granddaughter as an offering in a Vietnamese Buddhist temple.

In contrast to these two vibrantly illustrated offerings, *Gogol's Coat* is a subdued gold and brown book, with beige endpapers and gold margins that frame the alternating pages of text and illustrations executed in oils. The brownish tints and urban setting convey a nineteenth-century flavour of impoverished clerical workers living in garrets and toiling in dusty offices, but the depictions of Gogol, his fellow office-workers, and his dog Rose have a cartoon-like quality somewhat reminiscent of *Saturday Evening Post* illustrations from the 1950s. In this retelling, Gogol has been turned into a young "alphabet copier" whose job is to copy out the alphabet from A to Z "in neat large letters" to be displayed in classrooms all over the country to teach children reading. In this version, the magnificent warm coat, costing all of Gogol's savings, is stolen but finally recovered through the cleverness of Gogol's dog Rose, a character added to the original story to soften its bleakness and bring about the happy ending.

The Parrot, adapted and illustrated by the father-daughter illustrator team of Laszlo and Raffaella Gal, is the most consistently satisfying of the four. All the elements of text and illustration work together to produce a book that can stand up to many re-readings. The book is designed by Michael Solomon, one of Canada's foremost designers of children's illustrated books. The spatial relationship between text and illustration in *The Parrot* changes fluidly from one spread to the next, providing variety and surprise. The opening spread, showing a princess rendered in finely-shaded pencil balanced by a large bright red parrot in the foreground and appearing against a coloured background of a medieval-looking town, offers a standard fairy tale beginning, "Once upon a time in an ancient kingdom there lived a merchant and his beautiful daughter." The story itself, which has a post-modern quality, celebrates the combinatorial play of narrative possibilities: the merchant, the beautiful daughter, the evil old king with designs on the daughter, the young prince, and a famous sorceress who teaches the young prince how to turn into a parrot. When the merchant has to go away and leave his daughter unprotected, the parrot flies in through her window and promises to tell her "the most marvellous tale in the world" so long as she doesn't let anyone or anything interrupt. While the soldiers of the wicked king knock at her door, the parrot keeps the princess safe inside the house by telling her a story — which is about a king, his beautiful daughter, a life-size doll that is a replica of the daughter, an evil king who sends his soldiers to kidnap the daughter, five terrifying witches who put a spell on the prince. Whenever the knocking outside the door becomes most insistent, the parrot thinks up new twists in his plot that will hold the attention of the princess and prevent her from opening the door to the would-be abducting soldiers outside. The story ends when the merchant returns to find his daughter still safe, but the parrot is still saying, "And then...." But it is obvious that the story could go on and on (suppose the returned merchant is *really* the wicked king in disguise and once he gets inside the house he swiftly imprisons the parrot and carries off the daughter). Beginning readers, who will urge their parents to keep reading, will be re-enacting the role of the princess herself who keeps saying to the parrot, as the soldiers knock outside, "Please, please go on.... Don't stop now when it's getting so exciting."

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