

As in *The Hunchback*, Wynne-Jones has to reshuffle story elements for the sake of brevity. Two of the unfortunate Lucy's suitors, Holmwood and Morris, are conflated by Wynne-Jones in his representation of the former. Dr. Seward becomes Lucy's father, rather than her would-be lover, and his asylum — like Dracula's English base, Carfax — is located near Dracula's landfall at Whitby in the North, rather than near London. While this latter move does not detract greatly from the plot, it does orphan an earlier statement by the vampire in Wynne-Jones's text, that he has "business in the greater London area," and it consequently removes the threat to the metropolis of an epidemic of vampires. Appropriately for his multi-cultural audience, Wynne-Jones has trimmed back the original's Catholic trappings, so that Mina Harker's badge of her defilement by Dracula is not the scar left on her forehead by Van Helsing's Sacred Wafer (Stoker, Ch. XXII), but the (now) more conventional "hideous [fang] marks on her neck."

Otherwise, Wynne-Jones has stayed quite faithful to the original, and includes the macabre scene in which the un-dead Lucy's sanguinary depredations on children come to a pointedly sticky end. He even hints obliquely at the sexuality embedded in Stoker's story by referring to the "voluptuous crimson lips" of the three female vampires who threaten Harker in Dracula's castle. In fact, while Wynne-Jones's *Dracula*, for the reasons already stated, is less satisfying than his *The Hunchback*, it is not because he has failed to retain important elements of the plot. Rather, he tries to remain true to the form of the original as well as to its content when, to my mind, what makes Stoker's *Dracula* memorable is its plot rather than its author's somewhat contrived style. With *The Hunchback*, however, Wynne-Jones is not haunted by the original author, and simply (re)tells the story. To great effect.

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### **Bullies, Bugs and Beginning Readers**

As a child, I scoured the library shelves for engaging books while my father read magazines and waited patiently for me. My job was easier (and quicker) when I discovered a series: I could then read all the Anne books, for example, and lament that there weren't more. It wasn't at the library, though, that I discovered Nancy Drew. These series books were passed among my friends and we competed to see who could read the most.

Writing books for beginners is about engaging readers in various ways, and series books are certainly one way to entice children. The *business* of producing beginning novels is thriving, but it causes many of my fellow educators and academics some distress. I use the word "business" advisedly. Publishers, even here in Canada, are always looking to expand their customer base, to find a hook as

effective as those numbered popular classics like Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys. The sheer number of children's books has increased fourfold in the last thirty years — no surprise that the number of beginning novels and series novels has likewise expanded.

As an educator, I know that children need to read lots of books. What is vital is to ensure that children derive understanding about how stories are shaped with characters and action, how people (especially kids their age) respond to daily events and, finally, about how their own friends think about books.

Easy books, then, are not just words to decode and understand. They should also be highly interesting and motivational; in short, they should entice readers to read.

Canadian publishers, noting the success of books like R.L. Stine's Goosebumps series, have mounted a number of series of their own, realizing that a positive response to one book in a series may well entice a reader to purchase more of the same. Adult readers will quickly recognize a repetition of plot lines and topics in many series books. Bullies threaten but are dealt with in the end. Bugs of various sorts — spiders, centipedes, and ants — cause a child difficulties with friends and parents, but the child resolves the problem, and so on. Most series books are, by and large, reassuring reads, offering the child a mild adventure, a lesson in dealing with others and a promise that challenges can be successfully met. While they are not all of award-winning quality, neither should they all be burned. Teachers and librarians, therefore, need to be cautious about purchases of series books but not reject them out of hand.

#### *Formac First Novels*

*Jan's Big Bang*. Monica Hughes. Illus. Carlos Friere. Formac, 1997. 61 pp. ISBN 0-88780-385-7. *Jan and Patch*. Monica Hughes. Illus. Carlos Friere. Formac, 1998. 55 pp. ISBN 0-88780-462-4. *Duff the Giant Killer*. Budge Wilson. Illus. Kim LaFave. Formac, 1997. 61 pp. ISBN 0-88780-382-2. *Mikey Mite's Best Present*. Gilles Gauthier. Illus. Pierre-Andre Derome. 58 pp. *Good for you, Mikey Mite!* Gilles Gauthier. Illus. Pierre-Andre Derome. 61 pp. *Maddie in Hospital*. Louise Leblanc. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Formac, 1996. 58 pp. ISBN 0-88780-374-1. *Maddie in Trouble*. Louise Leblanc. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Formac, 1996. 58 pp. ISBN 0-88780-428-4. *Robyn's Want Ad*. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Formac, 1998. 57 pp. ISBN 0-88780-458-6. *Shoot for the Moon, Robyn*. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Formac, 1997. 58 pp. ISBN 0-88780-388-1. *Fred and the Flood*. Marie-Danielle Crouteau. Illus. Bruno St. Aubin. Formac, 1996. 60 pp. ISBN 0-88780-430-6. *Fred and the Stinky Cheese*. Marie-Danielle Crouteau. Illus. Bruno St. Aubin. Formac, 1995. 60 pp. ISBN 0-88780-372-5. *Lilly to the Rescue*. Brenda Bellingham. Illus. Kathy Kaulbach. Formac, 1997. 61 pages. ISBN 0-88780-386-5. *Lilly's Good Deed*. Brenda Bellingham. Illus. Kathy Kaulbach. Formac, 1998. 54 pp. ISBN 0-88780-460-8. *Morgan and the Money*. Ted Staunton. Illus. Bill Slavin. Formac, 1998. 59 pp. ISBN 0-88780-456-X. *Morgan Makes Magic*. Ted Staunton. Illus. Bill Slavin. Formac, 1997. 57 pp. ISBN 0-88780-390-3. *Max the Superhero*. Sylvain Trudel. Illus. Suzanne Langlois. Formac, 1995. ISBN 0-88780-376-8. *Will and His World*. Sylvain Trudel. Illus. Suzanne Langlois. Formac, 1995. ISBN 0-88780-434-9. *Carrie's Crowd*. Lesley Choyce. Illus.

Mark Thurman. Formac, 1998. ISBN 0-88780-464-0. *Go For It, Carrie*. Lesley Choyce. Illus. Mark Thurman. Formac, 1998. ISBN 0-88780-464-0.

Formac Publishers' First Novels series offers a variety of titles by different authors and illustrators, some of whom have two novels included (a kind of series within a series). The structure is the same in each book: nine or ten chapters of about five pages each, large type font, 5,000-7,000 words in all, ten black-and-white full-page illustrations. The reading level is grade two. First Novels is an uneven series, varying greatly in quality. *Jan's Big Bang* by Monica Hughes and *Duff the Giant Killer* by Budge Wilson serve to illustrate this contrast.

Monica Hughes is a well-known and respected author of young-adult novels (winner of the Canada Council Prize for Children's Literature) and her contribution to the First Novels series is certainly an exemplar of how to write a credible novel within the constraints of the format. The story concerns two grade-three girls, Jan and Sarah, who try to devise a science fair project. They consider a volcano (vetoed by their teacher), an ant farm (dropped by Jan's grandmother) before settling on a garbage-composting project, complete with worms and disgusting smells. This leads them to the discovery that rotting vegetable matter produces methane gas, which is highly explosive. That discovery leads to a memorable Science Fair Day.

The story is told in first person and the action is carried forward primarily by abundant dialogue: "'The worms turn garbage into beautiful garden dirt. They've got leaflets explaining, if you want to ...' But we're not listening any more. Sarah and I look at each other. Our problem is solved. 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' she asks. 'You bet. Let's go!'" (32). The vocabulary is easy; that is, it is comprised mainly of words which young readers encounter frequently with a refreshing mix of more difficult words such as "compost" and "methane" which are explained in context. Such books teach young readers new words (as from science) and they give young readers practice in developing automatic recognition of sight words, needed to help them attain fluency.

Jan and Sarah overcome each obstacle in a way that young readers will find satisfying and have just enough adventures to keep readers turning the pages. Carlos Freire's illustrations support the text with interesting details such as ghostly faces in the walls of Jan's basement, and humorous close-ups of distressed worker ants carrying bundles of baby ants.

Budge Wilson's *Duff the Giant Killer*, on the other hand, has a number of problems. First is the difficulty with point of view. Told in third person, it wanders among the views of a number of adults such as mothers and police officers, thus losing focus on the child's adventure. While an adult might identify with the emotion described in "Mrs. Abrams could feel her ribs expanding with the terror that was inside her" (50), a child most likely would not.

Although it too has plenty of dialogue, *Duff the Giant Killer* often tells the story in a more distant fashion rather than showing it through the main characters' words. Two of the ten chapters, in fact, are devoted to a nosy neighbour looking myopically out her window at the boys who are play fighting, and deciding that one has actually killed the other. Even if the subject matter does not make an adult cringe in these days of the Columbine and Taber school tragedies, the style makes

this book one of Formac's weaker titles.

As recommended purchases from the rest of this lengthy list, I would suggest those books by Hutchins, Staunton, Choyce and Bellingham. Unfortunately, those by Gauthier, Leblanc, Croteau and Trudel are somewhat awkward translations from French.

### *Vanwell Mudcat Kids*

*Cheddar*. Susan E. Merritt. Illus. Renee Cuthbertson. Vanwell, 1997. 58 pp. ISBN 1-55125-003-9. *Sleep Little Centipede Sleep*. Susan E. Merritt. Illus. Andy Cienik. Vanwell, 1999. 58 pp. ISBN 1-55125-021-7.

Vanwell Publishing's Mudcat Kids series books are all by Susan Merritt whose previous titles include scholarly works and a young-adult novel. They are also about 50 pages long, with seven to nine chapters in all and are written for a grade three level. The one-per-chapter illustrations, lacking both details and interesting points of view, are much less appealing than those in the Formac series. Merritt also offers books about bullies and bugs. The books concern the various adventures of a group of children, the Mudcat kids, at an elementary school. This enables Merritt to focus on a different child in each book with familiar characters returning in familiar roles such as the bully, Crunch Kincaid.

*Cheddar*, the first book in the series, offers parallel stories of a little orange cat named Cheddar who is being terrorized by a large mangy alley cat, and the Mudcat kids who are having their own problems with the aforementioned Crunch Kincaid. These books, while offering none of the charm of *Jan's Big Bang*, are solidly written and should entice readers to try another book in the same series.

*Sleep Little Centipede Sleep*, another in the Mudcat series, has a more straightforward plot line that centres on an alarm triggered by a spider, and a kindergarten reading buddy project threatened by the loss of a pet insect. There are plenty of details here which most adults would find disgusting but would appeal to many young readers: George, the main character, is bitten by a centipede, Crunch spits in a bag of chips, water from a fountain tastes like cream of tomato soup. All in all, however, this is not as interesting as *Cheddar*. The story is resolved prosaically with the alarm-ringing spider disposed of and the reading buddy getting plastic bugs to keep in a jar after George has squashed his centipede.

### *Fitzhenry and Whiteside First Flight*

*Fangs and Me*. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Gordon Sauve. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 54 pp. ISBN 1-55041-512-3. *Rain, Rain*. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 40 pp. ISBN 1-55041-520-4. *Omar on Ice*. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 38 pp. ISBN 1-55041-XXX-X.

Fitzhenry & Whiteside's First Flight books also offer beginners a series of grade levelled books. Written at a grade-three reading level, *Fangs and Me* has 50 pages divided into ten chapters and eight black-and-white illustrations (mostly of rather stiff-looking people). Despite the common topics of bullies and bugs found here once again, Rachna Gilmore succeeds in creating a believable tale about a girl who

has trouble making friends: "Dad put his hand on my shoulder. I tried to smile. It came out kind of wobbly. 'Sometimes life's tough, Maisie, and you just have to get through it.' I was so glad he wasn't trying to cheer me up that I actually felt a bit better" (9). Maisie admires a spider she calls Fangs and manages to cope with a bully who is the new kid next door. She eventually overcomes her shyness and makes a new friend (and no, it's not the bully!). Gilmore handles her characters with deftness and creates a plot line that will be interesting to young readers.

Another First Flight book worth commendation is Maryann Kovalski's *Rain, Rain*. This story, suitable for a grade-one reader, offers the best of models for writing a series book that helps young readers build both their reading ability and a positive attitude towards reading. The story concerns two children, Joanna and Jenny, whose day at the beach is saved by a very clever grandmother, despite the rain. In fact, when the sun does come out, they don't even notice it. Here the writing is both easy and enticing, even for beginners: "At the bathroom door, there was a sign: *Welcome to Grandma's pool! Dogs allowed.* They opened the door. 'Last one in is a rotten egg!' said Grandma" (22-23). The sign mentioned is actually part of the illustration for the reader to look at and read. *Rain, Rain* is humorously illustrated throughout in full colour (also by Kovalski). Young readers who use pictures as clues to meaning will find these illustrations detailed and supportive.

#### *Pokeweed New Readers*

*Nightgown Countdown*. Frank B. Edwards. Illus. John Bianchi. Pokeweed, 1999. 23 pp. ISBN 1-894-323-04-1. *Snug as a Big Red Bug*. Frank B. Edwards. Illus. John Bianchi. Pokeweed, 1999. 23 pp. ISBN 1-894-323-00-9. *A Crowded Ride in the Countryside*. Frank B. Edwards. Illus. John Bianchi. Pokeweed, 1999. 23 pp. ISBN 1-894-323-02-5.

For the youngest of new readers, Pokeweed offers a series of brightly-coloured rhyming books that invite beginners with their predictable text and well-drawn illustrations. As one might perhaps predict from a writing and illustrating partnership which dates back to their time at *Harrowsmith* magazine, Edwards and Bianchi's stories focus on rural places. And there are bugs here as well! *Snug as a Big Red Bug* tells the tale of a search for winter shelter which concludes "I found this great place/ In Farmer Brown's rug/I'll stay here all winter/As snug as a bug." Illustrations show the world from a bug's point of view. Children will enjoy guessing where the bug is trying to stay based on their examination of the close-up illustrations. Successive pages reveal a sheep's coat, a duck's feathers, a dog's fur and a man's hair. Young readers will recognize familiar animal characters and plots in this series.

#### *Final Thoughts*

The outpouring of series books will, of course, challenge teachers and librarians to choose individual books carefully rather than purchase an entire series and risk the waste of precious acquisitions budgets. All series books do not introduce readers to characters of the stature of Lois Lowry's Anastasia Krupnik, or Montgomery's Anne, but Gilmore's Maisie (*Fangs and Me*) and Hughes' Jan (*Jan's Big Bang*) would be welcomed into the life of most young readers. Even more important, the best of

series books would invite children to discover other books worthy of reading by pursuing the work of a single author – a strategy all readers follow.

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### Pioneer Life in Ontario

*Lamplighter*. Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic Canada, 1987. 115 pp. \$5.99. ISBN 0590713736.

Bernice Hunter's *Lamplighter* offers a benevolent view of late pioneer life in the Ontario of the 1880s. Above all, this novel is a story narrated by a kind-hearted and loving storyteller, much like the main character's grandfather, who on certain evenings opens *Stories for Leisure Hours* and reads to the family by the fireside.

The story centres on William, a boy who has just turned seven, and follows him through one whole year, from July to June, from being the family baby to being a "young man" (110). During the year he and his mother are confronted by a bear, the children are housebound by a terrible blizzard, William falls off a horse and breaks his leg, and there are many other seemingly less significant events, all of which he absorbs and responds to. William also becomes aware of birth and death, the latter through the death of his grandmother and — equally disturbing for the boy — the drowning of kittens, and the slaughter of his favourite turkey (which ends up on the Christmas table). In short, like any boy, he experiences happiness and disappointment as he attempts to redefine his place in the family circle.

Hunter's treatment of setting is often very convincing. Her handling of the blizzard and the anxiety it arouses is one of the most memorable scenes in the novel. However, in her affection for a past world, she tends to romanticize what would have been an often extremely harsh existence. For instance, William's reticent, stern father responds to his wife's wish for a water pump and resignation at having to draw water from a stream, with "it was healthful for the children to fetch water up the hill. It would make men and women out of them" (40).

"Old-fashioned" virtues such as this are central to the novel, and to the title's significance: William decides he wants to be a lamplighter when he grows up in order to help keep the "streets safe for folks" (15). Gradually, as the novel progresses, the repeated but unobtrusive presence of lanterns, firelight, and candles contributes to the feelings of love and caring that this novel quietly promotes.

### Gritty Realism in Mid-nineteenth Century Nova Scotia

*Hannah*. Diana Vasquez. Coteau, 1999. 133 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-550501496.

The community of immigrants working in the mid-1800s Nova Scotia mining settlement where Diana Vasquez's novel is set live a desolate, harsh existence. Young