

classics to the world. The single surviving copy, which is in the Osborne Collection of the Toronto Public Library, has been recreated with the aid of electronic technology. The physical book is an *objet d'art* in itself. Printed and bound in Italy, it represents the best of the bookmaker's art. The paper is a fine simulation of aged stock. The illustrations, very much of their original period, are finely wrought and coloured in pleasingly-harmonious golden tones. At the same time, there is a simplicity and realism about them that is enormously appealing.

This book is a collection of nursery rhymes popular in a Canada that was young itself. Here the title puns, but with some subtlety. The illustrations supply the motions that were originally associated with the rhymes, in case any reader is unfamiliar with such traditions as "Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross." The collection seems to be quite complete, and the vocabulary of the originals is preserved, allowing for both continuity of experience (say, from a grandmother to a grandchild) and a simultaneous chance for children to learn other ways of saying things. The rhymes here are all perfect, and no meaning lost.

One notes with delight that this is "the first of a series that will bring loved, vintage children's books back into the family library." There is definitely room for more such books.

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Legends, Lore and Litigation

The Mermaid's Muse: The Legend of the Dragon Boats. David Bouchard. Illus. Zhong-Yang Huang. Raincoast, 2000. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55192-248-7. *Who Wants Rocks?* Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak. Illus. Vladyana Langer Kryorka. Annick, 1999. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-589-X, 1-55037-588-1. *The Bone Talker.* Shelley A. Leedahl. Illus. Bill Slavin. Red Deer, 1999. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-214-0. *Prairie Summer.* Nancy Hundal. Illus. Brian Deines. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1999. Unpag. ISBN 1-55041-403-8.

David Bouchard achieves a masterful blend of legend and history in this dramatic retelling of the story of China's poet-in-exile Qu Yuan. Mysterious truths are revealed as the poet and his muse are misunderstood by the fearful and literal-minded villagers. In a spectacular climax, the dragon boat's origin impressively explains the richer significance behind the instruction "see through your heart."

A profoundly atmospheric work, thanks to Zhong-Yang Huang, all the majesty and drama of *The Mermaid's Muse* is enhanced by masterful brushwork and moody colour schemes. *The Mermaid's Muse* is the third book in the "Chinese legends" trilogy, following *The Great Race* and *The Dragon New Year*. Small wonder that Huang was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award in Children's Book

Illustration by Michael
Arvaarluk Kusugak from
Who Wants Rocks?



Illustration for *The Great Race*. The creators and producers of this complete series should be very proud of their vividly attractive achievement.

Every elementary school library should have all three titles, for their beauty and for the reaffirmation of the cultural richness we enjoy in Canada today.

Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *Who Wants Rocks?* evolves at a deliciously thoughtful pace in a contemplative story that, while cautionary, still sidesteps preachiness adroitly. An insight emerges that sadly too many people need to realize: the richness of a contented spirit easily outweighs the voodoo value of whatever electronic moneymarkets rat-racers of today still pursue. Timeless and appropriate, surely, for any generation.

Vladyana Langer Kryorka's lusciously free watercolour swirls and bleeds are pulled together with dynamic black ink in a scratchy style that adds great drama to this delightful work. A small quibble, however: I'm not sure about the success of even a gently smeared face on the little mountain — why not allow the reader's imagination to conjure and project a spirit upon it instead? The line between legend and fairy tale seems to have been crossed unnecessarily. Doubtless there were debates around the long oak table in Annick's boardroom over this tricky issue. Even though the resolution depends pretty much on personal taste, it remains an interesting example of the classic difficulties inherent when an abstract enters the literal world — any illustrator's biggest conundrum.

Since any unsalaried reader could instantly identify with *Who Wants Rocks?* I would recommend they get a copy and wallow in the reassurance this tale offers. Cash obsessives, beware!

Somewhat disconcertingly, Shelley A. Leedahl's *The Bone Talker* sidesteps the course its provocative title might imply to some. There are no prognostications

over ancestral bones here. Instead we follow, slowly at first, a struggle in which a devoted husband, family and community try to re-enliven a formerly active woman who has chosen to resign herself to old age — to distract her from talking about her old bones. Get it? Well, the problem seems a touch mundane and overall there lurks the distinct whiff of earnest twenty-first century sensibilities, but Leedahl weaves a satisfactory resolution. She rises above the landscape-as-quilt predictability and leaves us with a whimsical, even mystical, finish.

Although Bill Slavin's figures and their faces suggest a too-close relationship with cartoon stereotypes, his heavily-textured colours on the prepared dark background revive a comfortable folksy look, rich and welcoming, eminently suitable to the tone and feel of the story.

What is *not* suitable in *The Bone Talker* is the pointlessly eccentric font size for the text. Who dares commit this crime in a work so worthy of better treatment? Not for the first time in Red Deer Press's booklist, the "text design" credit (read "responsibility") goes to Kunz and Associates. On each page the lead line is in a good strong fifteen or sixteen point size, but then the following paragraphs are abandoned to an almost unreadable ten or eleven point — especially obscure when cast upon a too-busy or too-dark background with some halfhearted screening thrown in, as it is on two occasions. Is it only me who finds this detrimental to the inviting atmosphere that the tale is attempting to conjure?

Why is this being allowed to happen? Is this some backward solution for a text-heavy story or a compressed layout? — surely not! Worse, is it some heinous cosmetic styling? I fear the latter and for now suspect that some misguided designer at Kunz and Associates damaged this project with trendoid graphics adapted from the magazine world. The real goal of a good designer is to provide outstanding yet *invisible* support. The design should never distract from the whole.

Please, Red Deer Press, re-examine your production team. Any work with the obvious quality of *The Bone Talker* does not deserve the embarrassment of font "hipsters" or their ilk. Banish them and elevate your titles from simply excellent to outstanding.

Surely everyone must cherish a memory where time and place fused so completely as to withstand the clock of logic? For myself, the month of May is permanently welded to a village on the River Exe in Devon, England: an exquisitely subtle pain of yearning surfaces in my soul, each spring. Consequently the following lines from *Prairie Summer* halted me in my tracks: "Hard to imagine any other time here ... surely this was really only a summer place?" — instant identification.

With this poetic magic, Nancy Hundal strikes gold in her heart-stopping gem *Prairie Summer*. Tender fragments of precious summers on the prairies resonate throughout Hundal's images of a childhood spent in pleasant abandon. Flowing and sometimes rueful recollections are released to describe a place where "cars are still big" and community weddings are merrier when "we belong too." The dry dustiness, screen-door slams and insect whines imprint so vividly that the time and place permanently reside within the author and so, vicariously, inside us.

As a sweet, strong support, Brian Deines's art reaches beyond mere book illustration with gentle spreads of golden-textured snapshot-like images. Deines ably escapes sentimental cliché with the honest brush only a true lover of this land

and its world would dare to wield. He honours his own Prairie childhood in so doing.

Overall the design is subtle and thus is effective — professional and yet self-effacing. There is no text designer with pretensions here. Congratulations to all for this gentle homage, such a dignified testimonial of love. This one's a real keeper.

*Robin Baird Lewis is an eclectic artist whose 30-year career has enjoyed highlights such as **Red is Best** (1982) and portrait work (e.g. *Sir Edmund Hilary*). Amidst a spate of mural painting, Robin also teaches. Recent titles include **To the Pool with Mama** (Annick) and **More than Words** (Hanan), a text about coping with autism.*

Owning Your Days and Naming Them: Books about Special Days

A Visit from St. Nicholas. Clement C. Moore. Illus. Kim Fernandes. Doubleday Canada, 1998 (1823). 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25784-8. *Muslim Child: A Collection of Short Stories and Poems.* Rukhsana Khan. Illus. Patty Gallinger. Sidebars by Irfan Alli. Napoleon, 1999. 72 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929141-61-X. *The Christmas Orange.* Don Gillmor. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart Kids, 1998. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3100-8. *The Last Straw.* Frederick H. Thury. Illus. Vlasta van Kampen. Key Porter Kids, 1998. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-022-6. *Woodland Nutcracker.* Avril Tyrrell. Illus. Frances Tyrell. Key Porter Kids, 1999. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-124-9.



*Illustration by Marie-Louise Gay from
The Christmas Orange*