

Nightmares and Daydreams

Each One Special. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. H. Werner Zimmermann. Orca, 1998. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-122-X. *Oonga Boonga*. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Scholastic Canada, 1998. Unpag. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12460-9. *It's Raining, Yancy & Bear*. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick, 1998. Unpag. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-529-6. *Dreams Are More Real Than Bathtubs*. Susan Musgrave. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Orca, 1998. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-107-6. *Rose by Night*. Mireille Levert. Illus. Mireille Levert. Groundwood, 1998. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-313-7.

I am grouping the reviews of these picture books into two clusters, since the books seem to sort themselves that way: the ordinary world of daytime, and the dreamworld of night. All five texts have in common a contemporary outlook and setting; a couple allude to single mothers (*It's Raining, Yancy & Bear*; *Dreams Are More Real*); another to both corporate takeover and the pain of forced early retirement (*Each One Special*); and two treat the sorts of childhood anxieties that form the basis of nightmares (*Dreams* and *Rose by Night*). Yet all foreground the cheerful resilience and ingenuity of a child's perspective, so that any sense of unease never informs the books too powerfully. Interestingly, the packaging of all, and much of the content, seems as much pitched at the adult likely to read these books aloud as the children likely to listen to them. I find something mildly precious about claims that the books were "really written" by characters in them, but the acknowledgement of a child's contribution to some of the images and expressions might heighten the sense of authenticity for readers.

The three daytime books take ordinary circumstances and find the possibility of the extraordinary in them, to a greater extent, I would argue, than the more obviously fantastical dreamworld books. Wishinsky's lively texts point out at different stages of a child's development the mutual benefit of a particular sort of bond formed. *Oonga Boonga* (first published in 1990, here reissued with new artwork) would appeal to the very small child with its vivid, cartoonish illustrations and the escalating ridiculousness of the simple situation of numerous loving and concerned people being unable, even through increasingly imaginative means ("Change her diaper." "Play Mozart." "Play rock'n'roll."), to stop a baby's inexplicable crying. The situation would resonate as well with adults, but probably even more so with the older child, since it's big brother Daniel whose presence as much as his nonsense words prove the magic key to stop his sibling's tears. The straightforward humour of this situation evolves into something more poignant (just as the illustrations take on a softer edge and greater complexity and realism) in *Each One Special*, in which a still older child, Ben, sees his friend Harry, a neighbourhood baker whose artistry makes each cake produced a masterpiece, deteriorate into a sad prematurely elderly man when a big company takes over his workplace and turns him out in favour of youth and uniform mass production. Adults reading this aloud might roll their eyes at the simplicity of the resolution, in which Ben encourages Harry to turn his artistic skills to clay sculpture, and he's soon the hit of the neighbourhood again, producing individualized lawn ornaments. Yet the young audience, overlooking the economics, might be more apt to see a sort of fable suggesting the various ways in which a basic skill (e.g., sculpture or drawing) might be expressed. Hazel Hutchins's *It's Raining, Yancy and Bear* has great charm in its

simple linear narrative, and in Ruth Ohi's gently expressive yet energetic artwork using autumnal colours. The story treats a little boy looked after by his grandfather while his mother goes to work; a rainy day prevents him from playing outdoors and his grandfather from gardening, so they take the bus to the city museum, and the rain lets up enough for a few moments planting sunflower seeds in late afternoon. I like the fact that the museum trip doesn't become a sort of school-tour lesson in how to visit the museum; the emphasis is more on general impressions and the meandering progress of a visit that doesn't really need a purpose but has intrinsic value. The device of having this one of the toy bear's arbitrary birthdays, and so switching identities with the child, is not really exploited and perhaps that's only fair, since there's no "magic" in this tale, only a suggestion of the greater opportunities for enjoyment available to those who take an imaginative approach to life: even a ride on a crowded bus in the rain becomes a delightful journey of adventure.

The other two titles, the dreamworld of night books, humorously treat the nightmare world of the child with exaggeratedly silly yet really quite menacing monsters, although the cartoonish drawings offset their terrors somewhat. The thrust of each book is quite different. Musgrave's first-grade protagonist fears going to bed at all, her dreams are so vivid, but this aspect of her life is put in a more general context of things she likes (her "stuffy" Lion, her cat Pine-Cone, her old mummy, her friend Chelsea) and those she's not so sure about (her dismissive older sister, monster movies) and those she dreads (bullies at school). There are times I feel the child's language is a little too much an adult's rendition of colloquialism, and that the impressionistic hodge-podge of this essentially narrative-less story seems a little too much like a poem in draft. However, the integration of text and drawing is highly effective for suggesting emphasis, and the determination of the scruffy little protagonist, who finds a way to use her vivid dreams, is both funny and poignant. Levert's read-aloud rhyme probably scanned better in its original French, but the structure of this would work well with very young readers, following Rose on a harrowing trip to the bathroom, during which she's confronted by progressively more threatening nightmare-figures conjured up by her lively imagination, which fortunately also permits her to reduce them to manageable proportions through the hasty recitation of a spell, or the clever trick of turning on the lights. The artwork here is a treat: vivid, surreal, lots of emphasis on bright garden hues (green, red, ochre, blue). Soft edges and rounded figures keep the visuals (even of witches, vampires and ogres) in manageable proportions as well.

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