A disenchanted frog is the heroine of Rosalind Allchin's *The Frog Princess*. In the brothers Grimm original, a frog insinuates herself into the life of a prince who then must find a way to release the princess trapped in the frog. Allchin's reworking of this popular story is delightful, announcing its breezy and contemporary style from the first page when the prince hurries off to a game of golf. The frog who ensnares the prince by rescuing his golf ball spends a day at his side but grows increasingly weary of the trappings of princess life. When the frog princess discovers, to her horror, that the delicacy at the evening ball is frogs' legs, she leaps back into frog life, leaving the prince and the promise of his kiss far behind. In a dramatic and funny climax, the frog rescues herself from the life of a princess with its protocol, politeness, and endless changes of clothing. Allchin's version offers a refreshing antidote to stories like *Cinderella* or *Princess Furball* where the point of the narrative is, of course, to re-establish the heroine in her rightful place as royalty. Here the frog princess is re-established in her rightful place as a frog. Allchin's illustrations are vibrant watercolours, creating a world which is medieval and Pre-Raphaelite, bright with clarity and richly-hued detail.

All three books are to be commended for bringing these folktales to wider audiences in pleasing presentations. *The Frog Princess* is appropriate for five- to eight-year olds who will understand the vocabulary and word play in the book. *As For the Princess?* is a little complicated for the age category it suggests (ages four to six) though it might hold the attention of a book-loving five- or six-year old. Five- to eight-year olds might be better able to relish the princess's punishment. *Rachel Captures the Moon* has a simplicity and beauty that makes it attractive to those younger than the intended audience (ages seven to ten) and those older too.

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Larger than Life

Of Mice and Nutcrackers. Richard Scrimger. Illus. Linda Hendry. Tundra, 2001. 223 pp. $8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-498-3. Ages 8-11. ***Frogger***. Edward B. Frank. Illus. John Bianchi. Pokeweed, 2000. 141 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-894-323-19-X. Ages 8-11. ***Benny Bensky and the Perogy Palace***. Mary Borsky. Illus. Linda Hendry. Tundra, 2001. 120 pp. $8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-523-8. Ages 8-11.

Of Mice and Nutcrackers, *Frogger*, and *Benny Bensky and the Perogy Palace* share a larger-than-life quality in their situation comedies that children will love. When gym teacher Mr. Gebohm takes revenge on Jane Peeler for using the gym for a play rehearsal of *The Nutcracker* when he wants it for basketball practice, his overreaction has the surrealistic quality one might expect in the dreams and nightmares of children. Similarly, the garrulous eighty-five-year-old Cigar Davis walking in on Frogger during his first babysitting job is slightly offbeat, if not weird, even in a small town where oddball behaviour is pronounced; but his proceeding to oversee an excavation of the occupant's walls to find treasures he had buried when he pre-

viously owned the house is even weirder. Finally, the Dog Obedience Trainer Viola Pin's break and entry into the Perogy Palace and her devious plan to put the Berenskys out of business by contaminating the dough mixers with "Walls-r-Us Wallpaper Past," "Klear-Kat Kitty Litter," "Home Grown Mealy Worms," "Soggy Sawdust," and "Hot and Horrible Black Pepper" is even more outrageous. While Cigar Davis as a caricature is an engaging curiosity, Mr. Gebohm and Viola Pin are most worthy comical villains.

Just as the above comic strip characters and the crises they precipitate have a nightmarish reality, so certain scenes which enact a kind of wish-fulfilment for the protagonist seem like the "stuff that dreams are made of." Consider the scene in which Jane Peeler stands up to Mr. Gebohm, who has taken over her gym space after she had received permission to use it:

> I smile brightly up at him. "This is *our* rehearsal period in the gym," I say. "We've been waiting all week for it. The principal said we could have it."
>
> He ignores me.
>
> "We're putting on *The Nutcracker* at the winter concert on Tuesday. You know, the story with the toy soldiers and the Mouse King and the Candy Princess. It's usually a ballet, but we're doing it more like modern dance. You'll have to send the boys home."
>
> "Go Away!" he roars. Like I'm a dog. "Go On, Get!" He curses for a while. I've heard all the words before, from Grandma. (110)

What child does not dream of standing up to obnoxious authority as Jane Peeler does here? The scene has that quality of wish-fulfilment in which the dreamer pictures herself as acting more heroic than might be possible in real life. Of course, Scrimger does something to smooth over this exaggeration so that Jane's portrayal, at least, has a veneer of realism. The line about her Grandma reminds us of previous domestic scenes in which Jane has had to put up with her abrupt (not to say impolite) chain-smoking, swearing grandmother, and we do agree that treatment may indeed have prepared her.

Similarly, dreamlike or rather nightmarish farce, at once hilarious and alarming, takes place in *Frogger* when Cigar Davis decides to excavate the walls in the house where Frogger happens to be babysitting. In a chaotic chapter, we watch novice babysitter Frogger use a backscatcher with the dancing-woman handle, on Cigar's recommendation, to "feel around" in the attic space for *his* treasure box. When Frogger at last emerges from the darkness of the crawl space, he is dismayed at the mess of excavated holes around them, but Cigar's nonchalance seems soporific, if not contagious:

> Cigar caught his look and laughed brightly. "Now don't go gettin' all worried — we'll patch this up later. Right now I'll just shove the little sofa back in place, an' no one'll be any wiser." (78)

Although Frogger is about to argue the point, he never gets the chance. Before he can open his mouth, a fire siren begins and the chain-link of disaster continues. Randy, a rather youthful but likeable fireman, arrives, and thus the oddball cast of characters with the gullible Frogger at the centre makes this novel a first for middle readers emulating their teenage peers.

Just as our enjoyment of the farce in these novels depends on our appreciation of or sympathy for the main character — the level-headed Jane Peeler or the easy-going, constantly surprised but non-judgmental Frogger — so the portrayal of the dog Benny Bensky becomes central to that book's success. Seamlessly, Mary Borsky grafts an identifiably human perspective on doggy propensities. When not so metaphorically "in the doghouse" for his lack of obedience training, Benny repents in terms that echo our own resolutions, particularly at this time of the year:

> *I will never eat food from the sidewalk,* he quickly decided, as he gulped them down. *Not unless it is a helping of perfectly fresh french fries or a head-down ice cream,* he added, slurping down a strawberry cone a little further down the path. *Or say, soft and chewy bubble gum, nicely melted on the sidewalk,* he told himself, coming upon a wad of sticky pink bubble gum. (57-58)

While the protagonists in these situation comedies are delineated in just enough detail to engage our albeit detached and mildly amused sympathy, the surrounding characters are either caricatures like Jane Peeler's hard-nosed grandmother or figures exaggerated or simplified like the fussy, indignant mother Sarah Troth. And the villains, such as Mr. Gobohm or Viola Pin — well, they remain delightly abominable projections from childhood nightmare in all its juicy improbability.

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Past and Present: The Appeal of Mystery

Stained Glass. Michael Bedard. Tundra, 2001. 312 pp. $22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-552-1. Ages 11 and up.

The children in Charles Endicott's family are named Emily, Elizabeth, and Albert — clearly, Charles's parents have a taste for old-fashioned names. Indeed, the appeal of Michael Bedard's *Stained Glass* lies in its ability to evoke the hard, alien strangeness of the past. Opening with a passage quoted from a twelfth-century treatise on glass-making, the novel begins at St. Bart's, a church never explicitly identified as Roman Catholic, which features a statue of the martyred apostle: "The statue depicted him holding the long hooked knife of his martyrdom in one hand, with the slack pelt of his skin draped over the other arm" (14). Such grisly details belong, as Bedard acknowledges, to a pre-Vatican II Catholicism that has been largely relegated to basement chambers, where Mr. Berkeley, the church custodian, tends discarded relics and neglected saints.

The eerie and sometimes grotesque fascination of medaeval Catholicism lends an air of mystery and exoticism to the early pages of Bedard's novel. A stained glass window shatters, and among the shards of ruby-tinted glass, Charles discovers a young girl, evidently homeless, dazed and disoriented. Over the course of the following day, he attempts to help her find her way home by wandering with her across his hometown of Caledon. At the same time, old Mr. Berkeley patiently fits