

Editorial: Boy and Toy Design

"Is this a *potty*?" the cashier at the toy store counter asks me, barely able to suppress her amusement. The other workers within earshot stop to listen to my reply. "No, it's a chair — or a toy," I stammer helplessly. "Or something." What I have in my hands is a red plastic shell that is called "Bilibo." "No one in the store knows what it is," they tell me chirpily. Held upside-down, it looks like a helmet with big holes for eyes. I like the look of it, and the feel, and I like that it comes with *no* instructions or batteries. I buy it. I take it home and my daughter discovers that when you put it on the floor, and put your bottom in its curved bowl, you can spin exuberantly. It is also an enormous sand and water scoop, a stool, a cauldron, a mould for a snowfriend, a hide-out for pirates, a pond for frogs, a skateboarding park for marbles, and countless other things. But it's not a potty. It's a well-designed object that the children I know love.

I'm in a strong position here, and most adults are: I buy my daughter's toys and books. I get to decide what is well-designed and what is not. And yet I often feel that I am at the mercy of manufacturers, promoters, and designers who reify *their* interpretations of childhood and imaginative play, of what is visually appealing, what is gender-appropriate, what promotes development, and what is fun. Sometimes I agree with them (Naf rattles, Kooshi things, Brio pull-toys, Vilic racing cars, Lego). Sometimes when I *don't* agree with them, my daughter does. She likes Playmobil's stony little plastic pirates, even though they're all white and male. She likes the Little Tikes farm set, even though the square-bottomed woman won't fit in the round-holed tractor seat. (Only the male farmer, the round one, gets to drive the tractor.) She likes *Toy Story* and *Ice Age*: I think they're visually stunning films that champion androcracy and the trivialty of women. She is drawn to some of the vulgar Little Golden Books, with their generic colour palettes, their predictable illustrations, their uniform placement of text and illustration that often tie in to mainstream movies and are sold in the check-out lines at grocery stores.

But she also loves books whose illustrations and design are superb: Marie-Louise Gay's *On My Island*, Barbara Reid's *Two by Two*, Nick Bantock's version of *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, and Janet Wilson's paintings for *Solomon's Tree*. And then there are those Canadian picture books whose texts are as strong as their illustrations: *Lizzy's Lion*, *How Smudge Came*, *Queen Esmerelda's New Shoes*, *A Coyote Columbus Story*. She loves those books, too, although the implied child reader seems to vary wildly from one to the next. But what makes these latter books somehow magical? Who de-

cides which illustrator will work with which writer? Who decides what size a book will be, how elaborate its endpapers will be, how glossy its paper, how big its illustrations, how large its type, how elaborate its font? Designers are usually involved in making these decisions — and, like toy designers, book designers help to not only interpret children's culture but also to create or "design" it. As Judith Saltman and Gail Edwards note in their seminal work, "Towards a History of Design in Canadian Children's Illustrated Books," the aesthetics of any one book were in the hands of only a few people in the early years of Canada's picture book industry, most of whom operated as both text editors and art directors. For instance, Kathryn Cole of Oxford University Press writes, "I think I can lay claim to a unique and privileged position. Being the only person in the 'division' [in 1988] I got to reject, select, contract, edit, design, art direct, paste up, and negotiate foreign sales of each book on the list, without having to argue with anyone but myself." While Canada's picture book industry has expanded over the years, as Saltman and Edwards detail so assiduously, our geography and economy have kept the industry relatively small and inhibited design innovation.

This is not the case with Bandai or any of the other manufacturers of virtual pet key-chain games, according to the second article in this issue of *CCL*. Michele White argues that toy designers, manufacturers, and promoters of virtual pet and baby games operate a billion-dollar industry that is based on "giving children what they want," a mandate that inhibits innovative marketing. The construction of the child in this case amounts to sex-typing along the lines of colour and function. White makes it clear that many toy manufacturers have the opportunity to avoid marketing their toys according to gender and to encourage cross-play, but they don't, citing the chicken-and-egg logic that they are giving children and parents what they want: monster-green boy toys that fight and pink girl toys that primp and suckle.

It is my hope that the articles on design in this issue of *CCL* will stimulate more research into the history, logic and appeal of children's books and toys, extending our inquiry into the way designers and promoters construct children's imaginations and design for them a world that may be pink and frilly or greeny-black and slimy, that may relate to or create Canadian motifs, but still hold room for a little red chair thingy that looks like a potty but is actually a . . .

Marie C. Davis

The "Bilibo" is designed by Alex Hochstrasser of Industrial Design of Zurich, Switzerland.