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The Realm of the Zany / *Bert Almon*

My Cake's on Fire! Diane Dawber. Illus. Pat Wilkinson. Borealis, 2001. 66 pp. $14.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-237-2.

Don't Be So Persnickety! The Runaway Sneezing Poems, Songs & Riddles of John B. Lee. John B. Lee. Illus. Frank "Woody" Woodcock. Black Moss, 2000. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-352-3.

Garbage Delight: Another Helping. Dennis Lee. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Key Porter Kids, 2002. 48 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-470-1.

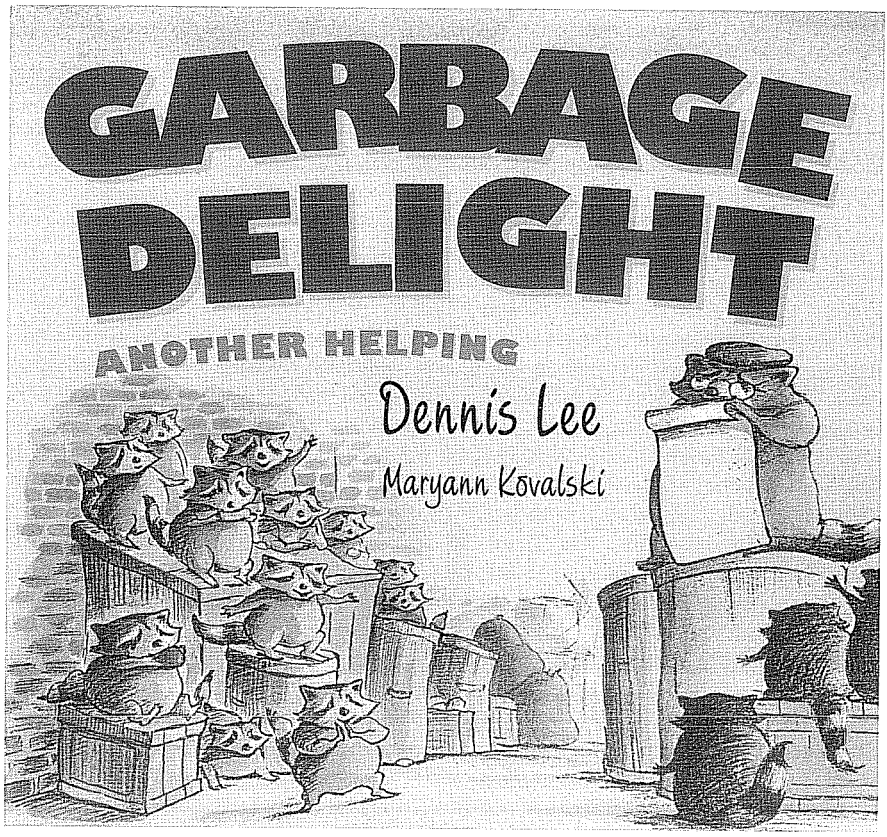
Nothing Beats a Pizza. Loris Lesynski. Illus. Loris Lesynski. Annick, 2001. $18.95 library, $6.95 perfect. ISBN 1-55037-701-9, 1-55037-700-0.

The books under review here are meant for children (roughly six-12 years) rather than young adults, and except for Diane Dawber's *My Cake's on Fire!* they provide good examples of the most popular contemporary approach to children's poetry, the tradition of strong rhythms, amusing word play, and whimsy, all traceable to Edward Lear and more recently to Dr. Seuss. Northrop Frye's discussion of the subconscious roots of lyric provides some context for understanding the style of such poetry. His iconic status makes it hard to remember that Frye had a remarkable sense of humour. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, his terms for the two fundamental impulses in lyric poetry are "babble" and "doodle" (275), words appropriate for a consideration of poetry written for children. For one thing, they lack the solemnity of so much literary criticism, although Frye suggests that these terms are the sources

for the more highfalutin principles of classical rhetoric, *melos* and *opsis*: music and design (278). "Babble" is the love of sounds, especially prosody, and is related to the charm — which is one of the basic types of the nursery rhyme. Children test the possibilities of language when they babble, from the cradle to the grade school tongue-twister. Babble employed in writing, Frye observes, often leads to doggerel, substandard rhymed work. Inept writers for children who fail to try very hard often lapse into doggerel. "Doodle," the shaping principle, has its origins in the riddle, another favourite form which, like the charm, has been annexed to children's literature. Frye suggests that "in babble, rhyme, assonance, alliteration,and puns develop out of sound-associations" (275). He could almost be prophesying the poems of Dennis Lee, who was once his student. Canadian poetry for children has been strong in the fields of prosody and sound effects, and the audience has responded very well, as the success of Dennis Lee and Sheree Fitch has shown. Fitch coined the term "utterachure" for her own sound-centered poetry and zany poetry.

Lee is not only a bestseller but a powerful influence. The principle of babble encourages the dominant mode of zaniness, a word which comes from "Zanni," an Italian nickname for "Giovanni," a traditional clown's name. Edward Lear made it natural to associate the sound-driven principle of babble with whimsy and funny drawings. Modeling themselves on Lee, many contemporary poets provide rollicking poems full of goofy fun. Lee excels at double rhymes, especially warped ones like "gurgles" and "hamburgles," and his rhythms are so infectious that it is not surprising that he wrote successful lyrics for the *Fraggle Rock* television series. One of his classics is *Garbage Delight*, first published in 1977 and long out of print. The book has been reshaped as *Garbage Delight: Another Helping*, with 17 new poems. He has also omitted a few. Most of the omitted poems were overlong and not very amusing, like "The Tickle Tiger." A couple of others may have been banished for violent imagery, like "Bloody Bill," the tedious tale of a drunken bully, which was also a good candidate for omission on literary grounds. But "A Sasquatch from Saskatchewan" should have remained just for its title, though the legendary beast is a denizen of the West Coast. Babble is sound-driven, after all, and the combination of Sasquatch and Saskatchewan is irresistable.

None of the new poems seems vintage Lee except for "Mulligan Stew," which describes the magical properties of this most heterogeneous dish: "It sets like cement, it grows hair on a shoe." Lee goes on to say (still rhyming with "stew") that it can "unplug a sink or remove a tattoo." His "Dinklepuss" has a name in the tradition of Edward Lear's "The Quangle Wangle's Hat," but the poem has no real description and little happens beyond the creature hitching a ride with a chain on a train. The major change in the book is in the illustrations. Maryann Kovalski, known for the illustrations of *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut, The Wheels on the Bus*, and 25 other books, has replaced Frank Newfeld. Kovalski uses raccoons as humanized figures whenever the poems do not require other creatures. Her figures can be saucy or plaintive or comic, but most often they look lugubrious. Lee's "The Operation," a fine poem about the restuffing of a toy named Hannah — which has been subjected to excessive play — has wonderfully solemn little raccoons watching as their mother performs the surgery with needle and thread. What child has not subjected a toy to excessive love bordering on abuse and then regretted it? Naturally raccoons, as gifted scavengers, are perfectly appropriate for a book about garbage delights: Kovalski often depicts her scampish subjects inside or getting



Cover illustration of ***Garbage Delight: Another Helping****, by Dennis Lee, illus. Maryann Kovalski*

into garbage cans. The revised book has far more pictures than the old one and the reproduction values are higher in this time of digital scans. Kovalski works with coloured pencils, gouache, water colours, and acrylic, and the mixed media blend harmoniously.

Writing well for adults does not guarantee that a writer can please children, but Dennis Lee, a major Canadian poet, has met the test of younger readers, who often know his poems by heart. John B. Lee is also a successful writer for grown-ups, with at least ten poetry collections and a number of awards to his credit. In *Don't Be Persnickety!* — yet another children's book with an exclamation point in the title — he comes across as a diminished version of the other Lee, as in "Sean-Paul's Wish":

> I wish I had a lion,
> a furry jungle cat.
> I'd dress him in pyjamas
> and a funny little hat.
>
> I'd tuck him in at bedtime
> where he would sleep with me.
> But if he bit me in the night,
> I'd punch him in the knee.

John B., like Dennis, favours quatrains and couplets. He rarely uses them with distinction. In many children's poets, the doodle principle — the ability to use poetic forms — fails to keep pace with the babble principle, the rhythmic and onomatopoeic drive. Frye links the formal tendency in poetry to the ancient form of the riddle, which is highly structured, and Lee provides 13 examples of riddles in his work. Unfortunately, the answers are pretty obvious and few children would have to turn to the back of the book.

John B. Lee has chosen some of the standard subjects of poems for children: pets (he has several poems on gerbils), unpopular foods, witches, frogs, and snowmen. He deals with funny aspects of bodies, like sneezing and stinking. Although these matters are interesting to children, they do not guarantee success. His tale of the "The Poly Ester Parrot & the Dust Ball Dog" is probably meant to update the classic poem about "The Gingham dog and the Calico Cat," but his creatures fail to "eat other up" or do anything interesting. Lee frequently shows an awareness of tradition: he rewrites Lewis Carroll's "How Doth the Little Crocodile," itself a parody of Isaac Watts's "How Doth the Little Busy Bee," as "How Doth My Little Crocodog." His crocodog drinks "a healthy grog / Of water poured from taps" and lies around "like a cushion getting flat." The poem is as flat as the crocodog.

Perhaps the best work in the book comes in "Pond Song," which provides amusing sketches of a number of animals in and around the water. He also describes a fungus, which is inevitably called "humungus" for the sake of the rhyme. Some of the poems are rhyme-driven in the babble tradition: "If Friar Tuck Were a Fire Truck" appears on a page opposite a poem about a juvenile hockey player named Billy McPuck who is, inevitably, "down on his luck." Lee's poem about a lizard painter named El Gecko (whose style is *not* Art Deco, we are told) ends feebly: "But he's left his art quantity / to some tsetses in the city / so he'll get a little pity when he dies." "Art quantity" is plainly inept: this Lee often lapses into doggerel. The line

drawings by Frank "Woody" Woodcock are like the poems: serviceable but not especially charming.

In spite of its alarming title, Diane Dawber's *My Cake's on Fire!* is actually less zany than her 1997 book, *How to Wrestle a Goldfish*, work in which the babble principle served her well. The new book ("for readers from 6 to no-fun-at-all") presents poems celebrating special moments in life, such as birthdays, namings and graduations. Each section title has the form "Welcome to" followed by descriptions such as "A New World," "A New Stage," or "Better Days." The need to talk about occasions has apparently cramped her imagination, restraining the kind of originality she showed in *My Underwear's Inside Out: The Care and Feeding of Young Poets* (1991). Every section ends with a set of toasts, chants and songs, brief items which are usually less interesting than the preceding poems. Dawber's *How Do You Wrestle a Goldfish?*, which I reviewed in *Canadian Children's Literature* 97, had more depth. That collection included a poem about Lucy, the celebrated prehistoric primate, and confronted some painful subjects along with the zany ones. Dawber has written books about chronic illness and is not inclined to ignore grief and pain. In *My Cake's on Fire!* she does conclude with a section on "Welcome to Your Place in History: Epitaphs." For herself, she says, rather flatly: "I've written these poems / and I'll tell you why. / Some day in the future / I too will die. So if I catch plague / or get hit by a bus / these words will remain / of the joy between us." It is good to find a poet who can mention Hildegard of Bingen as readily as Mother Teresa. Next time, Dawber should stretch her imagination again and avoid the formulaic. The book is illustrated with some unexceptional drawings by Pat Wilkinson, her usual accompanist.

More visually and verbally appealing is *Nothing Beats a Pizza*, written and illustrated by Loris Lesynski. The cover is promising, with a caption in the lower right hand corner: "Read out loud — with pizzaz." She is definitely in the realm of utterachure. She provides lots of onomatopoeia, pure babbling delight in sound, particularly when talking about eating pizza. Her themes include some predictable ones like school and pets, but she also provides some parodies of nursery rhymes: in one of them Jack of Beanstalk fame is a pizza delivery man taking a pizza up to the giant's house. And she substitutes pizza for porridge in her version of the Goldilocks story. Lesynski admirably ends the book with a note to the reader suggesting composing poetry is a way to satisfy the hunger of the imagination. In footnotes to this epilogue she says, "Why 'pizza'? The author admits that *she's* in love with zzzzz-zy sounds like these." Babble indeed, the word "pizza" is quite zany, at least in English. She also points out that poems don't have to rhyme, useful information for readers just beginning to think about poetry as something to write. Lesynski usually rhymes her own poems, without falling into quatrains and couplets as readily as the two Lees.

For all of Lesynski's love of sounds, her book is most contagious visually. She says on the copyright page that the art "was rendered in colored pencil, watercolor, house paint, tomato sauce, eyeshadow, rubber stamp-pad ink, and ordinary pencil." All quite possibly true. Her colourful pictures gain from her creative use of the page: odd addenda and quips are tucked into convenient places on pages devoted to fuller poems, and she is quite capable of printing a page sideways. The copyright page also names the fonts used, some of which are quite unusual. It is quite possible that a computer-wise child would try exploring some of them, particularly Lemonade and the wacky sounding Klunder. Lesynski can create the visual

equivalent of onomatopoeia: in one poem she says that pizza is slippy and slidey, and the very words wriggle and twist because of the font used. At the foot of the same page, she uses words that mimic the chewing of pizza and gives instructions on the speed with which to read them.

Except for Dennis Lee's book, none of the new titles considered here seems a sure classic, likely to be revised and reprinted after a quarter of a century like *Garbage Delight*. Zaniness is a manner easily put on. It can create giggles or laughter, but the test is whether or not the poem (like Lee's "Alligator Pie") is likely to be learned by heart. John B. Lee, Loris Lesynski, and Diane Dawber seem unlikely to achieve this sublime compliment. As for Frye's formal drive, the principle of doodle has best been served in recent years by Barbara Nickel's *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, published in 1999 and also reviewed in *Canadian Children's Literature* 97. Nickel won a major adult award for poetry in 1997, the Pat Lowther Prize, and her young adult novel, *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart*, was shortlisted for three literary awards for children's writing, including the Mr. Christie Award. She uses an abundance of poetic forms, including elaborate stanzas, sonnets, shaped poems, and the Japanese *tanka*, which is based on syllable count. Her subject is prairie life, especially as experienced in youth. However, Nickel's work is aimed primarily at young adult readers rather than the six- to 12-year-olds likely to enjoy zany tradition. Rhymed verse has the advantage of being memorable in the most literal way. Free verse for children is hard to pull off because it rarely appeals so directly to the ears. George Swede, one of the best Canadian poets writing for children, uses terse syllabic forms adopted from the Japanese, not quite free verse but not traditional either. Such poems are concentrated if not zestful. Concentration tends to avoid the luscious possibilities of babble. Swede's poetry collections for children are unfortunately out of print. At the moment, the zany dominates original children's poetry in Canada.

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