Reviews / Comptes rendus

As Canadian as Apple Pie and Old Glory / *Perry Nodelman*

Grizzly Pete and the Ghosts. Janet Amsden. Illus. John Beder. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-719-1.

Going on a Journey to the Sea. Jane Barclay. Illus. Doris Barrette. Lobster, 2002. Unpag. $21.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894222-34-2.

Elliot Gets Stuck. Andrea Beck. Kids Can, 2002. Unpag. $12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-014-7.

Capturing Joy: The Story of Maud Lewis. Jo Ellen Bogart. Illus. Mark Lang. Tundra, 2002. Unpag. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 1-88776-568-8.

That's Hockey. David Bouchard. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-223-4.

Archibald's Boo-Boo. Douglas Arthur Brown. Illus. Bruce John Brown. Solus, 2002. Unpag. $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-896792-08-1.

Victory at Paradise Hill. William Roy Brownridge. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-219-6.

Circus Play. Anne Laurel Carter. Illus. Joanne Fitzgerald. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-225-0.

Under a Prairie Sky. Anne Laurel Carter. Illus. Alan and Lea Daniel. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-226-9.

Good to Be Small. Sean Cassidy. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-734-7.

Seeing and Believing. Eliza Clark. Illus. Vladyana Langer Krykorka. HarperCollins, 2000. 32 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-648517-0.

A Cat Adrift. Maria Coffey. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-727-2.

All on a Sleepy Night. Shutta Crum. Illus. Sylvie Daigneault. Stoddart Kids, 2001. 24 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3315-9.

Edward the "Crazy Man." Marie Day. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. 1-55037-721-3.

How Sleep Found Tabitha. Maggie de Vries. Illus. Sheena Lott. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-193-9.

Where's Pup? Dayle Ann Dodds. Illus. Pierre Pratt. Tundra, 2003. 32 pp. $18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-622-6.

All Along the River. Blair Drawson. Groundwood, 2003. Unpag. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-546-6.

Busy Little Mouse. Eugenie Fernandes. Illus. Kim Fernandes. Kids Can, 2002. Unpag. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-776-2.

Two Shoes, New Shoes, Blue Shoes. Sally Fitz-Gibbon. Illus. Farida Zaman. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-729-0.

The Kite. Luis Garay. Tundra, 2002. Unpag. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-503-3.

A Christmas for Carol. Len Gasparini. Illus. Aino Anto. Seraphim, 2002. $11.95 paper. ISBN 0-9689723-5-7.

Stella, Fairy of the Forest. Marie-Louise Gay. Groundwood, 2002. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-448-6.

When the Giant Stirred: Legend of a Volcanic Island. Celia Godkin. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $22.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-683-9.

Glory Boy. Ted Goodden. Aylmer Express, 2002. Unpag. $24.95 cloth. ISBN 0-9689835-0-2.

Princess Backwards. Jane Gray. Illus. Liz Milkau. Second Story, 2002. Unpag. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-896764-64-9.

Amber Waiting. Nan Gregory. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Red Deer, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-258-2.

Courage to Fly. Troon Harrison. Illus. Zhong-Yang Huang. Red Deer, 2002. 32 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-273-6.

Camping. Nancy Hundal. Illus. Brian Deines. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-668-5.

Twilight Fairies. Nancy Hundal. Illus. Don Kilby. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $21.00 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-645-6.

I'd Know You Anywhere. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-747-7.

Priscilla's Paw de Deux. Sharon Jennings. Illus. Linda Hendry. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-718-5.

A Day with Nellie. Marthe Jocelyn. Tundra, 2002. 24 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-600-5.

Anancy and the Haunted House. Richardo Keens-Douglas. Illus. Stéphane Jorisch. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-737-X.

Salmon Creek. Annette LeBox. Illus. Karen Reczuch. Groundwood, 2002. 40 pp. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-458-3.

Rocksy. Loris Lesynski. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-751-5.

Emma's Yucky Brother. Jean Little. Illus. Jennifer Plecas. HarperCollins, 2001. 64 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-06-028348-3.

Mallory and the Power Boy. Pete Marlowe. Illus. Cindy Revell. Annick, 2000. 32 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-689-6.

A Pod of Orcas: A Seaside Counting Book. Sheryl McFarlane. Illus. Kirsti Anne Wakelin. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-681-2.

This Is the Dog. Sheryl McFarlane. Illus. Chrissie Wysotski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-551-4.

The Last Unicorn on the Prairies. Rick McNair. Illus. Chris McVarish-Younger. Great Plains, 2002. Unpag. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894283-36-8.

The Sled and Other Fox and Rabbit Stories. David McPhail. Illus. John O'Connor. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 30 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-517-4.

The Bear on the Bed. Ruth Miller. Illus. Bill Slavin. Kids Can, 2002. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-036-8.

A Big City ABC. Alan Moak. 1984. Tundra, 2002. Unpag. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-587-4.

Quackadack Duck. Allen Morgan. Illus. John Beder. Annick, 2003. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-761-2.

Farm Year. Monika Popp. Groundwood, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-452-4.

The Name of the Child. Marilynn Reynolds. Illus. Don Kilby. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-221-8.

But If They Do. Bill Richardson. Illus. Marc Mongeau. Annick, 2003. Unpag. $18.95 cloth, $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-787-6, 1-55037-786-8.

Sally Dog Little. Bill Richardson. Illus. Céline Malépart. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-759-0.

When We Go Camping. Margriet Ruurs. Illus. Andrew Kiss. Tundra, 2001. 32 pp. $17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-476-2.

Wild Babies. Margriet Ruurs. Illus. Andrew Kiss. Tundra, 2003. 32 pp. $18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-627-7.

The Mole Sisters and the Cool Breeze. Roslyn Schwartz. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-771-X.

The Mole Sisters and the Question. Roslyn Schwartz. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-769-8.

Yo Baby! Roslyn Schwartz. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-755-8.

Bun Bun's Birthday. Richard Scrimger. Illus. Gillian Johnson. Tundra, 2001. Unpag. $9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-637-4.

Princess Bun Bun. Richard Scrimger. Illus. Gillian Johnson. Tundra, 2002. Unpag. $16.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-543-2.

Brady Brady and the Singing Tree. Mary Shaw. Illus. Chuck Temple. Stoddart Kids, 2002. Unpag. $6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6272-8.

Brady Brady and the Twirlin' Torpedo. Mary Shaw. Illus. Chuck Temple. Stoddart Kids, 2002. Unpag. $6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6271-X.

Cappucina Goes to Town. Mary Ann Smith and Katie Smith Milway. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Kids Can, 2002. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-807-6.

The Most Beautiful Kite in the World. Andrea Spalding. Illus. Leslie Watts. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-716-9.

Solomon's Tree. Andrea Spalding. Illus. Janet Wilson. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-217-X.

We'll All Go Flying. Maggee Spicer and Richard Thompson. Illus. Kim LaFave. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-698-7.

Hush. Anna Strauss. Illus. Alice Priestley. Key Porter Kids, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-442-6.

Full Moon Rising. Joanne Taylor. Illus. Susan Tooke. Tundra, 2002. 32 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-548-3.

The Night Walker. Richard Thompson. Illus. Martin Springett. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 32 pp. $21.00 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-672-3.

Then and Now. Richard Thompson. Illus. Barbara Hartmann. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 32 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-508-5.

There is Music in a Pussycat. Richard Thompson. Illus. Barbara Hartmann. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-513-1.

The Rumor: A Jataka Tale from India. Jan Thornhill. Maple Tree, 2002. 32 pp. $17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894379-39-X.

The Rainmaker. Barbara Todd. Illus. Rogé. Annick, 2003. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-775-2.

The Art Room. Susan Vande Griek. Illus. Pascal Milelli. Groundwood, 2002. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-449-4.

It Couldn't Be Worse! Vlasta van Kampen. Annick, 2003. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-783-3.

Marigold's Wings. Vlasta van Kampen. Key Porter, 2002. Unpag. $21.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-468-X.

Rough Day at Loon Lake. Kathleen Cook Waldron. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Orca, 2002. Unpag. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-195-5.

The True Story of Trapper Jack's Left Big Toe. Ian Wallace. Groundwood, 2002. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-415-X.

Give Maggie a Chance. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 32 pp. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-682-0.

What's the Matter with Albert? A Story of Albert Einstein. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. Jacques Lamontagne. Maple Tree, 2002. 32 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-894379-32-2.

Riddle Mee Ree. Mary Withers. Illus. Fiona Yardley-Jones. Tutkam, 2002. 28 pp. $19.98 cloth. ISBN 0-9697552-3-6.

The Mess. Jennifer Wolfe. Illus. Cindy Revell. Annick, 2002. Unpag. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-734-5.

Sindbad's Secret. Ludmila Zeman. Tundra, 2003. Unpag. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-462-2.

Jessica's X-Ray. Pat Zonta. Illus. Clive Dobson. Firefly, 2002. 28 pp. $19.95 cloth, $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55297-578-9, 1-55297-577-0.

As I opened the three large boxes containing the picture books that the *CCL* editors had sent me to review, I found myself anticipating a very good time. Here were almost all the picture books produced in Canada in the last while — nearly 80 of them — and it looked like they were going to be wonderful. There were so many vibrant colours and sense-pleasing depictions of shapes and textures emerging from those boxes — an abundance of rich sensual information for me to absorb and enjoy and tell others about. I could hardly wait to start reading and looking.

Having since taken a closer look at the books, I'm sorry to have to report that there was less excitement in those boxes than first met my eye. The books are indeed vibrantly colourful and, for the most part, proficient in style and design. They ably represent how technically accomplished and dependably professional the Canadian picture book industry has become in the few short decades of its existence. Indeed, that's more or less the trouble with them: they are assured and competent textbook examples of what the picture book as a genre has become on our continent in our time, but that's about all. There is little here that is fresh or innovative or even all that imaginative. Viewed as a group, these books are depressingly similar to each other, depressingly similar to picture books being produced in the U.S. and internationally, depressingly similar to countless thousands of picture books produced in the last century. They are something like children's literature yard goods — nothing special, just more of the same bland serviceable stuff.

There are reasons why that should be the case. The most obvious one is the current fragile state of the Canadian children's publishing industry. Recent events have made the production of Canadian books for children a perilous enterprise: the domination of the bookselling business by one large firm, Chapters Indigo, with a dangerously self-serving return policy; the bankruptcy of an important publisher, Stoddart, and its partner book distribution company, General Distribution Services, and the resulting chaos for many other publishers; a decline in the number of younger human beings born in Canada and the rest of North America;[1] a decline in interest in reading among the fewer young people there are; ongoing cutbacks in writers' and publishers' grant programs that have traditionally fuelled the industry; and further cutbacks in the school and library budgets that account for most sales. Most significantly, the free flow of books across the Canada-U.S. border allowed by NAFTA has made the publication of books exclusively for the Canadian market financially unfeasible. It's revealing that almost all of these books, produced in Canada by primarily Canadian publishers, announce themselves on the verso of their title pages as being published or distributed both in Canada and in the U.S., and that almost all provide an American address as well as a Canadian one. Many of them even offer American spellings rather than the usual Canadian ones. For example, a Canadian company called, somewhat ironically, Maple Tree Press publishes Jan Thornhill's version of a Jataka tale as *The Rumor* — no specifically Canadian "rumours" circulating here. Without some sales in the American market, a children's book is unlikely to break even, let alone hope to make a profit for its publishers. The publishers of all of these books are, then, clearly hoping for success in the U.S.

Unfortunately, furthermore, success in the U.S. these days seems to demand an ever-narrowing set of constraints and conditions. Similar changes in bookselling

and cutbacks in school and library budgets affect Americans as they do Canadians. Meanwhile, the multinational corporations that own just about all of the significant firms producing children's books in the U.S. have little interest in literature as anything other than merchandise, and so in the spirit of good business practice and the tyranny of the bottom line, they demand an ever-increasing level of profitability from ever-diminishing publishing programs. As a result, each book must make more money, so fewer innovative or even mildly unusual books are being published and increasingly more effort is being made to appeal to the most popular and potentially profitable segments of the market: TV and movie tie-ins, series books, imitations of previous bestsellers, and books with clear connections to subjects and concerns mandated by the curricula of the most heavily-populated states. In other words, an increasing proportion of the books published in the U.S. are deliberately a lot like other books previously published — and, therefore, a lot like each other. It's no surprise, then, that in aspiring to appeal to the exact same segments of the same market, the publishers of these Canadian picture books should have produced books so depressingly like each other and so like so many other children's picture books produced before and elsewhere.

Some of the similarities are purely generic. There are cautionary tales much like a long tradition of cautionary tales and whimsical fantasies much like earlier whimsical fantasies. There are a plethora of books about delicate fairies, bumptious gnomes, talking animals in human clothing, princesses with strange powers, unhappy middle-class children with various sorts of chips on their well-dressed shoulders, and other over-familiar denizens of the world of children's literature. There are also a number of books that seem like pathetically faithful acts of imitation. David Bouchard's *That's Hockey*, illustrated by Dean Griffiths, is as centrally involved with *Canadiens* hockey sweaters as is Roch Carrier's Canadian classic *The Hockey Sweater* (1984). Mary Ann Smith and Katie Smith Milway's *Cappucina Goes to Town*, illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes, is eerily similar to Phyllis Krasilovsky's *The Cow Who Fell in the Canal* (1957), illustrated by the American Peter Spiers, a book first published half a century ago about another cow who heads off to town by herself. Andrea Beck's *Elliot Gets Stuck*, about a chubby stuffed toy animal who gets stuck in a small opening and needs some situation-comedy help from friends, seems suspiciously like one of Pooh's misadventures in A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926). Anna Strauss's *Hush*, illustrated by Alice Priestley, involves a mother repeatedly singing a child a song as creepily sentimental as the one repeated in Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever* (1986), and Hazel Hutchins's *I'd Know You Anywhere*, illustrated by Ruth Ohi, involves a father as obsessively protective as the inescapable mother in Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* (1947). I don't know for sure that any of these authors were familiar with the books to which theirs seem so similar. I do know that the similarities reveal a firm commitment to exceedingly conventional ideas about what children are or should be and about what story experiences adults should provide for young people that have been prevalent throughout the history of children's literature.

All of that might suggest that there isn't anything particularly Canadian about these books, and that's true. For the most part, the books represent a childhood assumed to be universal in its interests and its experience — or, at least, universal across North America. They tend to eliminate any distinctly Canadian setting or custom or language along with the distinctly Canadian spellings. Most of them might as well have been set in Cleveland as anywhere in Canada.

That's not to say that there aren't some books included here that are not distinctly Canadian. But the ones that are are blatantly so — picture books that represent Canada through a filter of maple-syrupy goo, as a touristy paradise of primeval wilds and idyllic forests and charmingly rustic farmyards that is, it seems, both marketable abroad and consumable by patriotically nostalgic Canadians. Looking at books like Margriet Ruurs's *Wild Babies* and *When We Go Camping*, both illustrated by Andrew Kiss, Joanne Taylor's *Full Moon Rising*, illustrated by Susan Tooke, or Monika Popp's *Farm Year* reminded me of the bewilderment Margaret Atwood reports in her poem "At the Tourist Centre in Boston," as she sees her country depicted in a similarly pastoral set of photographs: "I seem to remember cities" (27). Indeed, only one of a fairly large group of books extolling aspects of the Canadian landscape remembers that there are cities: Alan Moak's *A Big City ABC*, first published in 1984 and re-released in a new edition in 2002. In the world of picture books, apparently, Canada was a more urbanized place two decades ago than it is now.

The celebration of a less urban, less typically contemporary world in these books about Canada is just one manifestation of an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. Various idyllic versions of the past continue to roll merrily on in just about all of these books, presumably as representations for contemporary child readers of what the less interesting or perhaps less childlike world they inhabit actually is or should be. A surprising number of these books represent places and people far removed from the suburban lives experienced by the middle-class Canadian and American children likely to form the most obvious audience for books, given how expensive (and how middle-class consumerist in their values) most of these books are. A number of books offer versions of folktales set in various jungles, hamlets, or outbacks and starring people or animals in old-style hats and coats. Even books with contemporary North American stories to tell tend to be set either in the country at the cottage or on traditional mixed and non-industrial farms, or else in what look like depictions of the older and more charming parts of cities — the kinds of idyllically sophisticated neighbourhoods that fans of children's literature will recall from classic picture books by illustrators like Ludwig Bemelmans, Virginia Lee Burton, Maurice Sendak, or Robert McCloskey. In one extreme case, Sally Fitz-Gibbon's *Two Shoes, New Shoes, Blue Shoes*, illustrated with a sloppy energy by Farida Zaman, the city looks more like the enchantingly happy Manhattan of my childhood imaginings than any Canadian city I know, complete with yellow cabs. It's not just the distinctly Canadian elements that are being left out of these books. It's also almost anything dirty or untidy or specifically contemporary or complicated or commercial or technological — anything that smacks of the real lives of so many children. There is no acknowledgement of the truth once spoken by the great American picure book artist Maurice Sendak in a conversation with Art Spiegelman (author of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* [1986]) that the two illustrators depicted in a cartoon in *The New Yorker*: "In reality, childhood is deep and rich. It's vital, mysterious, and profound. I remember my own childhood vividly. . . . I knew terrible things . . . but I knew I mustn't let adults know I knew. . . . It would scare them" (Spiegelman and Sendak 80-81). Apparently, all these Canadian publishers believe adults are easily scared.

I can only assume that publishers produce this sort of blandness in the faith that it is what the almost exclusively adult purchasers of children's books across North America want — a children's literature that is less about depicting reality for

child readers than it is about protecting adults from the knowledge that actual childhoods are never as innocent or as untroubled as most adults nostalgically want to believe. The happy nostalgic world of so many of these books represents exactly what a lot of adults would like to tell children to pretend to believe in, in order to prevent the adults from having to deal with the consequences of acknowledging the children's actually less tidy and less blissful experiences. Such books might well sell like hotcakes across North America, if only there weren't already so many other books already filling up the bookshelves that do the same thing in the same way. It's instructive that children free to move beyond the restrictive choices of adult purchasers tend to choose the dark worlds of Harry Potter or most video games over texts more repressively childlike.

Whether they are successfully saleable or not, one thing about these books seems unquestionable: as a group, they do an excellent job of representing the state of the art — the Canadian picture book, circa 2003. A closer look at them reveals much about current assumptions about children and children's literature and about the condition of the market that caters to those assumptions.

Canadian Pastoral

Let me begin with the few books that assertively declare their Canadian provenance. A number of these books represent a by-now well-established genre, one possibly begun by Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet in her highly successful *A Prairie Alphabet* (1992) and *A Prairie Year* (1994), both illustrated by Yvette Moore: a loosely organized series of pictures depicting people doing mundane but wholesome tasks in lush, usually non-urban landscapes, described in what aspires to be poetic prose. The shared purpose of these books is an attempt to capture how wonderful it feels to be in a certain place at a certain time — or, more accurately, what it *felt* like, past tense. Despite the sometimes contemporary clothing of the people they depict, these books tend as a group to exude an obsession with happy family moments and peaceful places that reads like nostalgia for a better time than the usual now — a pastoral utopian time, a Canada that clearly never was.

There are a variety of utopias. In Joanne Taylor's *Full Moon Rising*, the utopia is a farm, its annual cycle depicted in terms of the different moons of each month (wolf moon, sap moon, harvest moon, and so on) and the activities performed under them by an aggressively typical family — a boy, a girl, one male parent, and one female parent, all similarly abled and decidedly Caucasian. While some of the clothing the characters wear in Susan Tooke's pictures looks contemporary, some resembles the 1940s — this is a farm where mom sometimes works in slacks and sometimes in a flower-print dress like a figure out of Andrew Wyeth. In some pictures, similarly, there are modern tractors (in the background), in others horses pulling old-timey sleds (in the foreground) off to the ever-so-Canadian maple-sugar bush. This nostalgicized now is infused with the pale light of all those different moons, bathing the characters in a glow that seems supposed to imply transcendence or oneness with nature but often just makes them look a little anaemic. Monika Popp's *Farm Year*, while purporting to be a story about a farm boy and his cow, actually has not much more in the way of narrative event than *Full Moon Rising* and offers a similar depiction of the cycle of the seasons on a farm — this one on an always sunny, delicately charming, and equally nostalgic (and totally unconvincing) version of the prairies. The sunny yellows predominate in the pictures even

when they are depicting a blizzard.

Then there is the utopia of the sort-of-wild. Nancy Hundal's *Camping*, illustrated by Brian Deines, describes how a family in which "money is scarce" pack up their SUV (a transportation choice which might account for the money shortage) and head off to an idyllic almost-wilderness. The text is a grocery-list sort of shorthand that aspires, not all that successfully, to profundity: "Hot days, warm evenings, chilled nights, cool mornings. The breeze, fluttering the leaves in a thousand tiny *hi's*, lifts my hair." Deines's impressionistic pictures work hard to capture the restful peacefulness asserted by the text — so hard that the characters, faces caught in dreamy moments of glaze-eyed solemnity and bathed in a pale glow of leafy greens and moonlight whitish-yellows, look even more disconcertingly unhealthy than the ones in *Full Moon Rising*. For all those garrulous leaves, there is something dead about this book — as there is also in Margriet Ruurs's less poetic but equally solemn *When We Go Camping*, in which a child offers a list of the things she does and sees and smells on another family trip involving tents and nature, this one in the mountains. In Andrew Kiss's illustrations, the girl and her family seem not only dwarfed by the landscape but strangely detached from it. Distinguished from the background by crisp edges or sometimes even white outlines, the often poorly drawn figures of people throughout this book look as if they have been cut out and pasted on top of the more successfully evoked landscapes, and despite the breathless enthusiasm of the text, they seem isolated from and intimidated by it. Kiss's illustrations are in something like the style of the enormously successful American artist Thomas Kinkade, a more-or-less photographic but decidedly idealized realism embellished with vastly overstated highlights that make everything and everyone emanate a divinely spiritual light. It's no wonder that the characters, their heads often bowed, seem awestruck enough to be stopped dead in their tracks — or maybe just dead.

The characters in *Wild Babies*, another book by Ruurs with similar illustrations by Kiss, seem much more alive — perhaps because they are animals. There are no people in this book to be awed by and feel isolated from the natural world. Nor are there in Annette LeBox's *Salmon Creek*, spectacularly illustrated by Karen Reczuch, whose tastefully elegant pictures of salmon at every stage of their existence, sensuously intense and interestingly varied in their predominating colours and points of view, successfully convey the beauty and wonder of nature that Kiss aspires and fails to achieve. It's unfortunate that Reczuch's accomplished pictures accompany a text as soppily pseudo-poetic as Hundal's chirrupy celebration of camping. The salmon merely experiences what salmon typically do, a fishy version of T.S. Eliot's "birth, copulation, and death" in which the copulation is replaced by egg-laying. But the agonizingly alliterative text provides the fish with a name, a memory, and an ability to experience a range of emotions that makes it sound like the luckless protagonist of a bad horror movie, a human imprisoned within a salmon's scales and condemned to do what salmon do. The same might be said, even more loudly, of the protagonist of Vlasta van Kampen's *Marigold's Wings*. This time, the thinking and speaking creature living out the typical life cycle of a non-human being is a caterpillar who plays dress-up with leaves before she creates a pupa — a transformation that causes her groovy friend the grasshopper to say "Cool" — and then turns into a monarch butterfly and embarks on a trip to Mexico more perilous than anything undergone by Indiana Jones, until the poor dear wakes up to realize it was all a dream of an adventure about to begin. I suppose writers think that hu-

manizing non-human beings allows children to empathize with them. I hope not, for providing Marigold with human responses to what butterflies experience makes her story seem sadistic and unnecessarily cruel.

That what's merely normal for salmon or butterflies becomes horrific when it happens to someone so strangely human reveals something contradictory at the heart of all these books. They all have blatantly obvious messages about nature — about its beauty and spiritual value and about the human propensity for damaging it. The jacket copy for *Salmon Creek* tells us that it is "a plea for the protection of salmon," and a preface to *When We Go Camping* offers this teacherly assertion: "When we go camping, we are careful to respect the environment and the impact we have on it." But despite this commitment to an ecological view of human interconnections with the natural world, the books all somehow manage to convey a serious disconnect between human and natural elements — a sense of people (or the humanized aspects of other species) being at odds with or dwarfed by or deadened by the natural landscape.

The most unsettling example of this is Sheryl McFarlane's *A Pod of Orcas*, "a seaside counting book" cleverly illustrated by Kirsti Anne Wakelin — the only one of these books that seems (at least in its pictures) to be consciously raising the question of animal and human relations. The impressively alive cover picture, showing the pod leaping energetically out of a threatening slate-blue ocean, suggests that the book to follow will be a vitally exuberant depiction of the ocean. This image is astonishingly misleading. The gently impressionistic pictures that follow show children peacefully at play on a serene light-filled shore — until, that is, the cover image of the orca pod suddenly reappears, disrupting the calm as the text tells us that the pod "explodes the glass sea." While pictures that follow restore the calm, they also prominently include creatures of the wild that observe the children at play in ways that strike me as looking very menacing. It seems that the wild is always out there, waiting, always ready to explode just beyond the edge of the campground where the leaves get less chummy. For all their ecological fervour, these books strangely confirm what Northrop Frye, in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971), called the "garrison mentality" typical of the Canadian character: a sense that nature is the enemy to be fled from — perhaps in a gas-guzzling SUV.

In terms of adult Canadian writing, the garrison mentality is a much-disputed idea, one believed to apply convincingly only to early Canadian texts if it has any credence at all. It's surprising, therefore, to see it emerge so clearly in these picture books. I find myself wondering why Canadian adults seem to want to encourage children to think about the bush in the same panicky way Susanna Moodie once did — unless these adults view children as vulnerable creatures as defenceless as the original settlers once actually were.

Once Upon a Time in Canada

In a few picture books set in a clearly Canadian past, nature is even more blatantly the enemy. In Anne Laurel Carter's *Under a Prairie Sky*, illustrated by Alan and Lea Daniel, a boy bravely dons his Mountie jacket and rides out under the inevitably threatening sky to find his missing younger brother. The text offers the boy's thoughts as he rides — a vision of himself as a fearless representative of law and order at war with the wilds, rescuing his brother and rushing him home to safety as

"Dark clouds chase" and "thundering outlaws shoot across the sky." The Daniels' watercolours evoke both the boy's excitement and the thunder in a chiaroscuro of lush orange light and deep purple shadow reminiscent of the work of the great American illustrator N.C. Wyeth. I have to admit that I'm not sure I understand the idea of this book. If it's just to evoke a universal childlike experience, why is it set so firmly in its specific moment of the past? If it's to allow child readers to experience history, why such a mundane and almost unparticularized slice of history? But while *Under a Prairie Sky* makes little sense to me, I can't deny its beauty.

Under a Prairie Sky is not the only book that both evokes childhood sensations at a moment in the past and seems not all that interested in history. In Marilynn Reynolds's *The Name of the Child*, illustrated efficiently but somewhat more routinely by Don Kilby, Lloyd is sent from the city to escape the flu epidemic of (I'm guessing) 1919 and finds himself terrified first when his aunt and uncle come down with the illness and then when he has to take their newborn baby to a neighbour's house through another raging storm. Less willing to defy the excesses of nature than the boy of *Under a Prairie Sky*, Lloyd turns out to be just as brave and just as able to bring a defenceless youngster to a safe garrison maintained by protective adults. William Roy Brownridge's *Victory at Paradise Hill* offers yet another storm in yet another rural past, describes yet another boy brave in the face of natural danger, and offers yet more therapy and even less historical detail. This time, the boy, his older brother, and his friends get stuck in a car in a blizzard, the boy talks his emotionally fragile brother (a professional hockey player whose bad knees have just brought his career to an end) into going off through the storm for help, all are saved by the family dog, and all develop the courage to go on with their lives even though the boy's crippled foot and his brother's ruined knees mean they both have to give up hockey. Lots of personal growth here, but not much in the way of history. This book reminds me of a short-story contest for amateur Manitoban writers I once judged, in which just about every third entry turned out to involve harried housewives getting stuck in cars in blizzards, finding the courage to survive, and learning to get beyond their discontent with their lives as a result. The only difference between *Victory at Paradise Hill* and all those sappy stories is that its main characters are not middle-aged women.

Oh, and also, it's about hockey. There's also another book about children playing hockey in the past — David Bouchard's *That's Hockey*, illustrated in a charming and energetic cartoon style by Dean Griffiths. A first-person narrator describes a childhood game of street hockey, is always seen from behind in the pictures of what she describes, and turns out at the end to be a mother who is now passing on her Rocket Richard sweater to her daughter. The sweater is old and ratty, and since the Rocket retired in 1960, so must be the mother — unless her adulthood as well as her childhood is history.

While it's not a particularly innovative trick (Gene Kemp used it years ago in her Carnegie-winning novel *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler* [1977]), I'm suspecting I'm supposed to be astonished and delighted that this rambunctious hockey-player turns out to be a girl. I'm assuming this because a more contemporary (and Canadian) hockey story, Mary Shaw's *Brady Brady and the Twirlin' Torpedo*, with garishly simplistic pictures by Chuck Temple, tells how the other team so successfully teases Tes about being a girl that she loses her cool and becomes just as inept on the ice as they believe girls always are — until Tes's sportsmanlike teammates figure out how to help her regain her composure and score the winning goal. Another Brady

Brady book, *Brady Brady and the Singing Tree*, critiques gender discrimination in the opposite direction, as Elwood, a lumbering boy known as Tree (the joke is Shaw's, not mine), defies his father's wish to be a hockey star and follows his own girlish dream of singing the anthem before the game. Apparently, real men don't sing.

According to its publisher's publicity, the Brady Brady series promotes virtues like "fair play" and "positive team dynamics." These widely-selling books — as well as a sizeable number of the other books I'm reviewing here — are additions to a long tradition of bibliotherapeutic books for children — books that promote values adults approve of by describing child characters behaving in ways adults find problematic and then having the characters face a situation that leads them to see the error of their ways, with the understanding that the child character's new belief is one child readers should be smart enough to share. The trouble with books of this sort is that, in beginning by showing child readers what adults think they already are and disapprove of, they confirm that that's what kids really ought to be — unless they want to be boring goody-goodies who submissively give in to adult oppression and stop acting like children. I suspect that these Brady Brady books do more to confirm than to challenge the power of conventional assumptions about gender, merely by taking them for granted as the way children usually think and need to be talked out of.

Once Upon a Time in a Land Far Away

Along with the few books I've already described that depict a distinctively Canadian past, a number of others are set in a past time somewhere other than Canada. In one case, that's merely evidence of an attempt to reach the wider North American market. Frieda Wishinsky's *What's the Matter with Albert? A Story of Albert Einstein*, illustrated with a charming but somewhat life-sucking nostalgia by Jacques Lamontagne, is the kind of picture book Canadians used to leave for Americans to publish — an informational book with no explicit Canadian relevance. Designed to inform children about the life and accomplishments of the non-Canadian Albert Einstein, the book describes how Billy, a reporter for his school newspaper in Princeton, New Jersey in 1954, interviews Einstein and learns about him. The book then channels the events of Einstein's life through the viewpoint of an insecure child and transforms this life into a parable about a misfit finding his way and learning an important truth: "I know there's nothing the matter with me. It's just the way I am." What the matter is with *What's the Matter with Albert*, then, is what it thinks matters about Albert — his existence as a role model for geeky outsiders rather than the important scientific work he did. The book is all too typical of informational writing for children that replaces factual information with values enhancement. In any case, I suspect the kind of child who might actually have an interest in Einstein would be too busy contemplating fascinating theories of everything to care much about being different or need much reassurance about how okay it is. In my experience, not being normal enough is usually a concern of more "normal" children.

Another group of books about the past, mostly retellings of traditional stories originally from oral traditions, represent an ongoing interest in and audience for books about the multicultural heritage of Canada's citizens — and also of those in the U.S., for it's the increasing focus on multicultural issues in U.S. curricula that makes books of this sort potentially competitive in the continental marketplace.

But illustrating traditional materials is a particularly demanding art. Not only are there understandably high standards of cultural authenticity that ought to be met, but there are also significant questions about what the stories once meant to their original audiences in relation to what they can or should mean to child audiences now. There is also a long tradition of picture book artists viewing the illustration of old stories as a sort of artisthood ritual — the best venue for demonstrating their mastery of their art. As a result, there are a lot of great older books out there for new ones to be compared to. While these versions of folktales reveal a laudable degree of cultural awareness and contain some of the most accomplished art of all the books under review here, they tend to pale in comparison to all the wonderful art in books published earlier. In the field of picture books, paradoxically, superb versions of old stories are just business as usual.

Vlasta van Kampen's *It Couldn't Be Worse!* is a good example. The illustrations, lively depictions of jolly folks in cute peasant costumes on an archetypically unmechanized picture book farm, are almost as charming as the even livelier pictures of equally jolly folks on an equally idyllic farm in Margot Zemach's *It Could Always Be Worse* (1976), an earlier version of the same Jewish tale; and there is also at least one other version, Marilyn Hirsh's *Could Anything Be Worse? A Yiddish Tale* (1974). Does anyone really need another one? While its pictures show only animals without clothing in the wild, Jan Thornhill's *The Rumor*, a version of a Jataka tale from India much like the European "Chicken Little," manages to convey a sense of the past in its use of motifs from traditional Indian tapestries in the borders around its pictures. The pictures inside the borders are so intent on multiplying images of animals that they begin to look like a jungle version of Martin Handford's *Where's Waldo?* (1987) and become too crowded to be compelling. Similarly, *Sindbad's Secret*, an Arabian tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* retold and illustrated by Ludmila Zeman, conveys pastness in pictures with borders that look like Persian carpets and characters dressed in harem pants, turbans, and other Orientalist regalia — I'm suspecting these costumes aren't all that authentic, even though (or because) I recognize them from so many Hollywood movies of my youth. Despite being constrained by the borders and weighted down by all the exotica, however, these pictures manage to be intriguingly delicate and boisterous at the same time — and a great pleasure to look at.

Two interesting books relate to the oral tradition without actually telling traditional tales. In *Anancy and the Haunted House*, Richardo Keens-Douglas tells his own original story about the well-known trickster spider from the oral tradition of the Ashanti people of Ghana. The story starts out as wittily as do the original Anancy (or, more usually, Anansi) tales, but it reveals its contemporaneity by turning into a overtly didactic version of the over-familiar fable about a lot of little creatures working together to defeat one big one. The illustrations by Stéphane Jorisch are another matter altogether — marvellously loopy cartoons in an ominously muted palette, depicting spiders with huge red noses and bodies striped like hard candies and a rooster in natty spectator shoes (where do the claws go?) and a truly awful suit. This is deeply original illustrational art that is aesthetically pleasing, intriguingly mysterious, and unfailingly full of narrative energy. Mary Withers's *Riddle Mee Ree*, illustrated by Fiona Yardley-Jones in a style as visually intense as Jorisch's but more static and much less able to convey emotion, is a story about animals telling riddles and stories in the traditional Caribbean style. The weird thing about it is that, while

it's about how storytelling happens, the stories never do actually get told — the book is so busy teaching about the multicultural past that it never gets around to offering the pleasure of a story. It also reaches the politically incorrect, distinctly pre-post-colonial, and somewhat ingenuous conclusion when Chimpanzee decides that man, who has arrived in the jungle and built a house, "is here to stay. . . . However, the forest is big enough for all of us." Tell that to the ecologists. Tell it to the salmon of *Salmon Creek*.

Not a folktale or even, as its subtitle suggests, a legend, Celia Godkin's *When the Giant Stirred: Legend of a Volcanic Island* represents a far less popular way of exploring multicultural backgrounds — depicting the actual lives of other people in other places. In this case, the other place is an island in the Pacific, and the people an impossibly clichéd "gentle, smiling" folk whose peaceful travelogue lives are interrupted by an erupting volcano. This is what its publisher calls an "information storybook" — non-fiction in a vaguely narrative form — so perhaps I shouldn't be surprised at just how boring these cataclysmic events can be made to seem. Equally bland, Godkin's illustrations look like what Gauguin would have produced had he decided to keep body and soul together by working for the Hallmark company. In another story about people elsewhere, Luis Garay's *The Kite*, Francisco lives a hard life in a barrio in, presumably, Nicaragua, where Garay himself comes from. Francisco's father is dead and his mother pregnant, and he sells papers in the marketplace to add to his mother's meagre income as a washerwoman. But despite all the hardship, Francisco arrives at a positive understanding of his circumstances after the baby is born, one of the stallkeepers gives him the kite he admired, and he finds joy and a renewed connection to his father as he flies it. If we read *The Kite* as its publisher's publicity invites, as a story emerging from the author's own past, then it follows a pattern found in many Canadian children's novels about traumatic times experienced by immigrants elsewhere before their arrival in Canada. Like the books I discuss in my forthcoming article "A Monochromatic Mosaic: Class, Race, and Culture in Double-Focalized Canadian Novels for Young People," *The Kite* treats misfortune experienced in another country prior to immigration as something necessarily remembered, but remembered as left behind and done with, clearly different and separate from Canada now, and thus emblematic of what Canada is opposite to — a contrasting marker to the peace and comfort of our land. Garay's intriguing pictures, muting the vibrant colours of objects by placing them against a primarily gray background and giving them an overlay of pointillist gray dots, nicely capture an ambivalent attitude to a past both lively enough for nostalgic memories and painful enough to be encapsulated as separate from our lives now. This is a theoretically hopeful book whose hope seems both undermined by its setting and underpinned by an extra-textual context implying a better future in a different place — our place.

As for multicultural stories of life in Canada now, they are strangely rare in this group of books, most of which feature decidedly white protagonists of apparently mainstream middle-class backgrounds. One exception is Andrea Spalding's *Solomon's Tree*, illustrated by Janet Wilson. Solomon is a young member of the Tsimpshian nation of British Columbia whose uncle helps him deal with the loss of a favourite tree in a thunderstorm by working with him on carving a mask from it that represents its spirit. Neither the British-born Spalding nor the Ontarian Wilson seem to posses the credentials needed to tell a story about West Coast Aboriginal people

without being accused of appropriating a culture not their own — something the producers of *Solomon's Tree* seem to be aware of, for the jacket copy makes a big deal out of the fact that Spalding got the idea for the story while taking a mask-carving workshop from "Tsimpshian master-carver Victor Reece," and the book includes a photo of a mask Reece made that Wilson used as the basis for the one she illustrates. In the workshop, we are told, Spalding "became aware that she received a cultural gift, one that she is honoured to pass on to children" — an infuriatingly positive spin on what I find to be an exceedingly bothersome act of cultural appropriation. That the story represents a contemporarily psychobabblish sort of feel-good therapy as an authentic form of traditional Native spirituality is just distasteful icing on an already unpleasant cake. Another book that is sort of about Aboriginal people, Blair Drawson's *All Along the River*, is a tall tale involving not only a canoe trip, a huge fish, some green-haired mermaids, a river giant, a ship full of pirates who "picked their noses and burped and farted and never said excuse me," but also two hunters from "the Chippewa tribe" and a whole pack of Chippewa "braves." In the light of these stereotypical Indians — Drawson's pictures even show them holding one hand up palm forward to signify greeting, albeit apparently not actually saying "How" as they do it — I suppose I ought to be even more offended by *All Along the River* than I am by *Solomon's Tree*. But the exuberantly wacky world depicted here has more to do with the Neverland of Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which had just about the same peculiar mix of citizens, than with any real place I'm familiar with — and I'm convinced that this sort of clearly outrageous fantasy is much less likely to do harm than the claim to realism in profoundly and disastrously unwacky books like *Solomon's Tree*. Besides which, *All Along the River* is very funny.

Another Canadian — albeit new Canadian — person of colour is the protagonist of Troon Harrison's *Courage to Fly*, illustrated by Zhong-Yang Huang. Newly arrived from the Carribbean, Meg feels frightened by the big city she's come to and hides herself away from it in her room — until she nurses a frozen swallow back to health, meets an old Asiatic man who encourages her to release the bird from the box she keeps it in, makes a white friend, and discovers that she, like the bird, also has the courage to fly outside in the open Canadian air. This is the sort of multicultural book that over-emphatically insists on the significance of culture — Meg meets the elderly Asiatic as, somewhat stereotypically, he does exercises with names like "Lonely Goose Leaves Flock" and "Wild Horse Chases Wind" in the park — and offers a harmonious rainbow of characters of differing backgrounds and colours. In insisting on both the rainbow and the ease with which Meg gives up her qualms and becomes a good happy Canadian, the book seems aggressively and unrealistically utopian — a wish-fulfilment fantasy about a Canada in which everyone is somehow both culturally different and separate and inherently together and the same. While Jenny, the protagonist of Andrea Spalding's *The Most Beautiful Kite in the World*, is white — well, actually, in Leslie Watts's eerily lifeless illustrations, sort of greyish, afflicted with the presumably idyllicizing pallor found in so many of these nostalgically "childlike" books — she is unable to fly her new kite until she makes a tail for it from materials provided by elderly neighbours named Omelchuck and Braun and a friend who is a boy of colour (in this case, a greyish light brown). The message of intercultural cooperation is just as blatant here as in *Courage to Fly*, as is the trope of flying as a representation of ideal childhood happiness, also found in Garay's *The Kite*. And once more, I find myself worried that so

many adult writers are spending so much time trying to persuade children that their lives can really be so airborne. It implies that a lot of us are deeply convinced that they usually tend to find it much weightier and less blissful.

Kids and Other Animals

I've been suggesting both that it's a problem that so many books do not depict Canadians of various colours and ethnicities and also that other complex problems about appropriation, authenticity, and over-optimism have a way of developing when books do occasionally contain such depictions. Some books represent an ingenious way of sidestepping the problem: telling stories not about racially varied people but about mixed groups of animals who talk and act like people.

In Kathleen Cook Waldron's text for *Rough Day at Loon Lake*, for instance, the only evidence that the four friends the story tells about are racially diverse is that one them possesses the Japanese name Nobu. It's only Dean Griffiths's pictures that reveal they are a squirrel, a turtle, some sort of lizard and — I'm guessing here, because she's about the size of a prairie dog — a mouse, and that the adults whose golf game they interrupt are all bears. The story thus implies happy thoughts about racial harmony without actually acknowledging it's doing so — and how can you get mad at a turtle for being a racial stereotype when, after all, it's just a turtle who happens to have a groovy vest and skater shorts on? The actual story of the book has nothing to do with multiculturalism and ironically represents a common kind of adult prejudice about childhood: not only is the friends' ignorant confusion of a golf course water hazard with a swimming hole meant to be understood as cute and adorable, but it results in them making a lot of money — thus confirming that, when you're a kid, it's always good to be dumb. Smart child readers will get the message that adults like them to seem dumb — that is, appropriately childlike — even when they know better.

Griffiths is also responsible for the illustrations in Frieda Wishinsky's *Give Maggie a Chance*, in which the characters are all cats but of different breeds. There might be a whiff of stereotyping implied by the fact that our heroine Maggie is an ordinary all-Canadian shorthaired cat, while the arrogant Kimberley, who brags about her reading skills and makes Maggie's life miserable, looks like some kind of fancy-schmansy longhair — a bicoloured Persian perhaps. She's clearly one of those hoity-toity aristocrats who needs bringing down a peg or two — as of course happens here. Both Maggie and Kimberley wear ever-so-feminine dresses with wide skirts and poofy sleeves, dresses right out of the Dick and Jane series of my elementary school days — perhaps a deliberate *hommage* in this book about learning to read? It's intriguing how both these books, which avoid racial stereotyping by using animals, seem forced to reinforce gender stereotypes in clothing in order to offer recognizable clues as to the sex of the animal characters.

Two other books involving animals, equally cute on the surface, imply darker depths within. Sharon Jennings's *Priscilla's Paw de Deux*, illustrated by Linda Hendry, is about a mouse who was born to dance and who finds happiness practicing after hours in a dance studio for humans until she runs into a scary watchcat who nearly kills her. But the cat turns out to be obsessed with ballet also, and he and Priscilla end up dancing together before an audience of all their friends. Revealingly, however, the picture of the audience at the recital shows the cats all on one side of the auditorium and the mice all on the other — and no people at all, despite their clear

presence in the world of this book. Despite the harmonious union of two likeminded non-comformists in the world of dance, there is an underlying and ongoing assumption here that cats and mice are eternal enemies — indeed, the happy story of Priscilla and the cat would not be so noteworthy or so happy if they weren't. Something similar happens in David McPhail's *The Sled and Other Fox and Rabbit Stories*. (McPhail is a well-known American illustrator, but this book is published by a Canadian company in both Canada and the U.S. — more evidence of the unification of the North American market?) In the first of three easy-to-read stories in this book, Fox almost runs right past Rabbit's house until Rabbit calls him back. Why Rabbit would want to do that becomes an issue in the next story, in which Rabbit invites Fox for dinner, Fox says he wants rabbit for dinner, and Rabbit, apparently ever the trooper, makes him a pile of mashed potatoes in the shape of the cook himself. There is no interspecies violence here, but there is certainly more than a whiff of an underlying suspicion of it. Even in these ever-so-gentle and ever-so-cute books, children's literature continues to represent a racially resonant cat-eat-mouse and fox-eat-rabbit world that, in insisting on basic and apparently insurmountable differences in beings from visibly different groups who nevertheless share the same spaces and the same language, has what strikes me as clear and obvious resonances in terms of some longstanding and distressingly sturdy assumptions about race. Maybe using animals in multicultural contexts is not so safe a sidestep after all.

Teaching Children to Be Childlike

One way or another, most of the books I've discussed so far represent a recurring utopianism. They are versions of the traditional paradise or pastoral idyll, depictions of a past world presumed to be better than the one most of us now actually occupy because it was less evolved — simpler, cleaner, more innocent, less prone to evil and confusion, and, perhaps paradoxically, taken to be more natural. Many popular adult ideas about childhood mirror these features, and much writing throughout the history of children's literature has focused on how wonderfully simple and innocent childhood is — or, better, ought to be. Adults know that the lives of children are rarely so idyllic — indeed, they reveal it even in books for children in which child characters often achieve a simply innocent childhood as a happy ending after first experiencing lives of supposedly adult danger and complexity. That sequence — an innocent childhood coming after and achieved as the happy ending of a series of dark and theoretically adult experiences — suggests that the prime ideological work of this literature is the job of showing children how to be children — how to understand the desirability of childlike innocence and how to behave in ways that will conform to that innocence and thus abstain or at least hide from adult view any "unchildlike" thoughts or behaviours that might spoil the perception of innocence. Many of the books under review here offer just such a view of childhood for what seems to me to be just that reason. In them, presumably older and wiser adult writers perform childhood: they think and speak in acceptably childlike ways so that child readers can learn to do so too.

Some of these books are merely conventional enough to do what children's books have often done before. For instance, Roslyn Schwartz's *Yo Baby!* operates fairly explicitly as a script for performance by a young child and an adult. Someone not shown in the illustrations says "Yo baby!" to a butterfly, who says it's not a

baby but a butterfly. Then a giraffe says it's not a baby but a pineapple, a pineapple says it's not a pineapple but a newspaper, and so on, until finally a baby says it's a baby. The pictures of objects appear on the pages prior to the ones that announce their names, a clear invitation for child reader to join in and guess the name — to be, in fact, the playful baby naming an absurdly illogical series of objects and creatures who appears to be the implied speaker of the book as a whole after the "Yo." The countless books for children that this one emulates — a famous example is Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947) — allow adults to play games with children that show children how to be playful in adult-approved ways. A little less explicitly performative, Marthe Jocelyn's *A Day with Nellie* describes the events of Nellie's day, a day clearly assumed to be typical enough for young children to read as their own. Because the book's clever collages depict the many, many objects in Nellie's life as things for children to explore and name, a semiotic and ideological analysis of what Nellie sees, feels, thinks, and does could be extended for many pages. This book offers not only a depressingly standard construction of childhood subjectivity as sense-oriented and playfully irrational but also a sumptuous vision of an object-filled consumerist lifestyle as merely the ways things are. Nellie, by the way, is one of the few children of colour to play a starring role in the books under review, and the endpapers show children of a variety of skin tones rollicking joyfully together. Is this perhaps a bid to make the book more palatable to white audiences who think their children won't relate to someone who looks like Nellie?

Intended for a slightly older audience, Sally Fitz-Gibbon's *Two Shoes, Blue Shoes, New Shoes* is a sort of inside-out version of Hans Christian Andersen's creepy fairy tale "The Red Shoes." Entranced by her new footwear, a child recites rhyming eulogies to them as she bounces joyfully through the streets — but instead of being danced to death and learning a lesson about greed and vanity, she continues to express her exuberant joy in increasingly playful ways until the decidedly happy end — and thus confirms that, when it comes to the ecstasy of shoes, lessons are definitely not in order and that childhood is and ought to be a time of thoughtless bliss. The Blahnik-obsessed protagonists of *Sex and the City* would surely approve. Maggee Spicer and Richard Thompson's *We'll All Go Flying* — a sequel to the Governor General's Award nominee *We'll All Go Sailing* (2001), which was also illustrated in assertively bold and very attractive images by Kim LaFave — also offers a child speaking joyfully in rhyme about the pleasures experienced on a trip, this time in a balloon. Also as in *Two Shoes, Blue Shoes, New Shoes*, the events experienced get wackier and less realistic as the book progresses, and a vision of childhood as intensely sensuous and almost orgiastically playful is offered as a model for child reader-viewers: "And you can come too / On the next fun ride." Part of the intended fun here — flaps that hide some of the objects mentioned in the text — doesn't quite come off, since the flaps don't completely hide the objects and thus make the pages look imbalanced and badly designed until the flaps are opened. To make it clear how very much adults want to teach children to have the right childlike responses to their experiences, there is yet a third book that offers a child's joyous and sense-filled verse description of a trip: Jane Barclay's *Going on a Journey to the Sea*, illustrated by Doris Barrette. It's essentially the same book yet once more, with a different setting, and I have nothing more to say about it. It's depressing to realize that so many adults are so convinced that children are generally imperceptive, unimaginative, and joyless enough to need all this encouragement to loosen up a little.

Indeed, there are books that are even more upfront in their anxiety about showing children how to see and think in childlike ways. Richard Thompson's *There is Music in a Pussycat*, "A First Flight Level One Reader" illustrated by Barbara Hartmann, is explicit in its teaching about the right way to listen: "listen to the music of right here. . . . Listen to the music of right now." *Then and Now*, another book in the same series also by Thompson and Hartmann, is a concept book about what comes before and what comes after, but the illustrations focus just as intently on children experiencing (and thus modelling for child viewers) the correct sense perceptions and the right kinds of feelings about them. For instance, we see one child dancing happily with butterflies in response to "Now it can flutter" and another gazing dreamily at the moon in response to "Then it was Round."

This sort of adult teaching of childlikeness to children becomes the explicit subject of two books. In Susan Vande Griek's *The Art Room*, yet another child narrator who talks in poetical rhythms tells about taking art classes from the Canadian impressionist artist Emily Carr, learning from her how to see beyond "the dimming light of our parents' waiting world . . . with eyes that were wide." The great Victorian critic John Ruskin once famously suggested that "the whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify — as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight" (2). This book intriguingly turns Ruskin's theory upside down and inside out: the artist with the sophistication to see with wide eyes teaches children how to do so, too — how to have the desirably artistic innocent eye of childhood. *The Art Room* is illustrated by Pascal Milelli in an appropriately wide-eyed, highly sophisticated, and quite attractive Carr-like style. Its sophistication becomes particularly apparent in comparison with the pictures in Jo Ellen Bogart's *Capturing Joy: The Story of Maud Lewis* — the actual art of the untrained outsider artist who is the subject of this informational book (the book also includes pencil sketches of Lewis's life by Mark Lang). Lewis's work, done on wood or cardboard and sometimes executed in boat paint, has a crude charm, but it looks quite unlike the subtly complex world of shifting light and colour seen by the supposedly innocent eyes of a Turner or a Cezanne or an Emily Carr. Lewis was an adult unschooled enough to actually see like an uninformed child might prior to being taught appropriately childlike vision by a knowledgeable adult.

Eliza Clark's *Seeing and Believing* makes the dynamic of these books — an adult teaching a child how to see like a child — into a story situation, as a girl worries that her father will never return from his voyage on the lake. Her mother reminds her of her father's love, still there though unseen, and says, "Remember . . . just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there. The most wonderful things take more than your eyes to see." In what follows, the girl keeps repeating these words as a mantra as she walks on the shore having childlike visions of hearing teacups in the wind and seeing wispy fairies dancing in the waves — a vision whose authenticity is confirmed in Vladyana Langer Krykorka's dreamily wistful watercolours. Taught by her adult mother to see more than standard adult reason knows, this girl learns a childlike optimism that is then rewarded by her father's safe return.

Seeing and Believing is not alone in offering the ability to see fairies as evidence of correctly childlike vision. In Marie-Louise Gay's typically breezy *Stella, Fairy of the Forest*, Stella and her brother Sam spend a day in the forest, playfully and hap-

pily looking for fairies and meanwhile confusing sheep with clouds and turtles with rocks and making other similarly endearing lapses in expertise, but no actual fairies appear. Instead, Sam claims he sees a fairy that Stella can't see — but he's looking at Stella, so perhaps we have to accept the title's assertion that Stella is herself a fairy. But she isn't literally one, so I have to conclude that she's a symbolic fairy — an engenderer of imaginative playfulness for herself and Sam, being fairy-like as metaphor for the wonders of the childlike. But if, as this book implies, children are wonderful because of their gloriously irrational ingenuousness, then they must be incapable of understanding how wonderfully meaningful their fairy-like innocence is. That leaves children out as implied readers — except, of course, children needing to know what sort of ignorance adults believe is bliss and what aspects of their knowledge to keep hidden from adults. Nancy Hundal's *Twilight Fairies* makes a similar connection between fairies and childlike imagination. In a text as annoyingly twee as the one she wrote for *Camping*, Hundal describes how Miranda's mother and brother doubt the existence of her friends the fairies — a scepticism readers will know is unwarranted and will feel superior to, for there the fairies clearly appear in Don Kilby's atmospherically moonlit pictures, gossamer wings flapping happily as they decorate the garden for Miranda's birthday party in the most kitschily cute way imaginable, and then attend the party, "the tinklehum of fairymerrymaking" audible only to Miranda herself. Tinklehum? Eeewww. I am reminded way too much of Dorothy Parker's famous review of an A.A. Milne book in her Constant Reader *New Yorker* column: "And it is that word 'hummy,' my darlings, that marks the first place in *The House at Pooh Corner* at which Tonstant Weader Fwowed up" (101).

Somewhat less peristalsis-encouraging (although I have to admit to a few ominous rumbles) is another book about a creature visible only to a child, Richard Thompson's solemnly portentous *The Night Walker*. Even though it is clearly and misleadingly visible in Martin Springett's illustrations, the Night Walker a boy hears behind him as he runs through the dark turns out to be merely a figment of his own imagination as it works on the sounds produced by the objects he collected earlier in the day clinking in his pocket. In Springett's evocative if somewhat over-texturized illustrations (they seem to be suffering form a bad case of Adobe Photoshop filter addiction), the boy and his mother have straight long dark hair, dark complexions, high cheekbones, and suede-like outfits that make them look vaguely like figures from some imagined Aboriginal culture and thus imply that the story refers to Aboriginal traditions of monstrous spirits of the wild along the order of the Windigo. But the ponderous gravity of the illustrational style seems directly antithetical to the tricky energy of traditional Native storytelling, and the whole point of the story is to undercut actual belief in frightening creatures with a rationalistic and normatively therapeutic message about them. Apparently on the assumption that young readers are too thick to figure it out by themselves, the boy's mother makes it crystal clear: "sometimes the monster you hear behind you in the dark is only the clink and click and rustle of the things you have collected during the day." After that sort of pretentious psychobabble, a final begrudging admission that the Night Walker might perhaps exist after all is singularly unconvincing.

At first glance, *The Night Walker* and *Twilight Fairies* seem to offer directly antithetical views about the authenticity of the creatures children imagine. But in affirming the existence of delicate happy creatures and denying the existence of scary monstrous ones, both books reinforce the same conventionally idyllic view of what

makes for an appropriately childlike imagination. Another book about a child imagining creatures in the night, Pete Marlowe's *Mallory and the Power Boy*, illustrated by Cindy Revell, defies that convention a little by appearing to confirm the actual existence of a more boisterous (albeit still quite unthreatening) creature visible only to a child — a boy who claims, "I have all the Power." After the lights fail, the Power Boy slides down a staircase of lightning into Mallory's bedroom and takes her up into the sky to find the lost power, and the two of them collect the power in balls of cold, water, heat, and light in order to get things going again. At the end, when Mallory's mother says, "I bet they were working all night to get it fixed," we who know who did the fixing are aware of the existence of a powerfully energetic force unknown to adults — powerful and energetic enough, it seems, to need to have its existence hidden from them. Strangely like Robert Munsch's *The Boy in the Drawer* (1982), the Power Boy emanates an energy that resonates intriguingly in terms of conventional ideas about masculinity: why can't he be the Power Girl? Is such freely expressed power necessarily a male thing? And if it's conventionally assumed to be so (as it all too often is in contemporary culture), is that why the female Mallory must hide from her parents the presumably masculine aggressiveness and energy inside herself that allows her to help the Boy regain his power — which she does, surely not incidentally, by helping him get his balls back?

Whatever vital forces *Mallory and the Power Boy* celebrates, it undercuts them and reaffirms the idyll of the childlike by offering yet another text cutely aspiring to whimsical poetry, "with the wind blowing the rain with a picker packer pock and the snow with a flim and a flam. And the sun went zang." And the reviewer went as far away as he could. Another book about night noises, Shutta Crum's *All on a Sleepy Night*, illustrated by Sylvie Daigneault, provides an equally onomatopoeia-laden description of the sounds that occur at night as the house is "singing its sleepy song." This book, clearly intended to be read at bedtime, operates on the fairly popular but surely perverse theory that the best way to put kids to sleep with literature is to bore them into drowsy lassitude with it. Exactly nothing happens here. The child protagonist snoozes off at the start of the book and remains asleep throughout it, completely unaware of the song the text describes. There's surely something a little non-intuitive about a story that deliberately tries to get its audience to identify with a character unaware of what's happening around him and thus stop paying attention to the story. Another bedtime book, Maggie de Vries's *How Sleep Found Tabitha*, is only slightly more eventful. As the insomniac Tabitha imagines sleep coming toward her from afar, she envisages various sleepy creatures of the wild inviting her to join them in their various oceans and nests, and she rejects them all until, inevitably, she drifts off with her own cat in her own bed. Sheena Lott's striking illustrations, showing the animals Tabitha imagines in a dreamy purple haze highlighted in stark splashes of white in the manner of overexposed photographs, give the book far more drama and artistry than its pedestrian text warrants.

Mommy and Daddy Know Best

Getting the kite you want or the shoes you want or the adventure you want or the courage you want. Saving your brother from danger or single-handedly solving a power failure. Having the ability to hear "tinklehums" or "pucker packer pocks." Just about all the books I've discussed so far are about childhood desire, more spe-

cifically about the adult legislation of childhood desire, about telling children what they ought to want, and almost always with the same purpose: protecting them from danger. Many of the books — including many of the idylls I've discussed so far — *appear* to celebrate childlike wishes for freedom from adult control and the constraints of restrictive adult ideas about good sense, good behaviour, and the avoidance of danger. But, as I've suggested, they actually find ways of undermining what they appear to celebrate. One way they do so is by replacing the actual desires of child readers with adult versions of the childlike. Another is by establishing that arrival at a space safely controlled by adults and adult values after desirable but dangerous adventures is a happy ending.

Many other books have the explicit purpose of undermining childlike desires by insisting throughout on their dangers and establishing the rightness and safety and happiness of adult supervision and constraint. One way or the other, just about all these books reiterate the foundational purpose and central obsession of children's literature throughout its history: persuading child readers that adults know what's best for them and their life is good just the safe old way it is already.

The most conventional and depressingly familiar of these books makes that point in the most explicit ways possible. As I suggested earlier, Hazel Hutchins's *I'd Know You Anywhere* replicates the unsettling celebration of inescapable parenting found in one of the creepiest children's books ever written, Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*. This time, the inescapable parent is not a mother but a father, who tells his son that, no matter where he hides or what he pretends to be, "I'd know you anywhere." Ruth Ohi's pictures show the boy smiling every time his father says it again, clearly signalling that a child's absolute absence of private space or freedom from Big-Brotherish surveillance is a very good thing indeed. Similarly, Anna Strauss's *Hush*, a gooey reprise of an even creepier book about a parent who never stops parenting, Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*, celebrates a mother who is always there for her daughter — and I do mean *always*: "Tears may fall," she sings repeatedly, "but I am here." It's scary that publishers believe parents will want children to think so positively of parenting so hands-on that it's never hands-off. As a firm believer in the proposition that the main responsibility of parents is to act in ways that will lead to their children becoming responsible enough not to need so much parenting, I hope these publishers are wrong.

Another group of surprisingly traditional books offers a variety of time-honoured ways of assuring children that the limitations they chafe at in their lives as small, inexperienced, and disempowered beings are in fact not bad things but good ones — that it's good to be weak and helpless and by implication, therefore, good to have more powerful beings around to keep you safe both from others and especially from yourself. Many books of this sort feature childlike animals as surrogate children. When Mamma Sheep loses her lamb in a book by Sean Cassidy, all the sheep pooh-pooh (well, actually, I guess, baa baa) Mouse's offer of help. But Mouse is little enough — that is, childlike enough — to be able to hitch rides on Fox, Turtle, and Hawk without them even knowing, thus proving what the book tells us in both its title and at its conclusion: it is, incontrovertibly, *Good to Be Small*. In the light of events here, the implication is that small beings can act independently and accomplish big things. But the apparent celebration of self-reliance is undercut at the end of the book when, as Mouse says, it's good to be small: the illustration shows not Mouse but little Lamb, safely and happily back in the care of his or her bigger mother, thus implying that the best part of being small is *not* having to fend for

yourself. The plot of another book I mentioned earlier as a slavish act of imitation, Andrea Beck's shockingly *Pooh*-like *Elliot Gets Stuck*, also hinges on the problem of being small. Elliot Moose, a small — that is, childlike — stuffed toy with desires as conventionally childlike as his little-brained precursor, wants to go out to play but can't get any one taller to turn the doorknob for him, so he tries to go out through the letter slot and, oh dear, gets stuck. There is only one word to describe this book, and that word is "cute." Indeed, it's an archetypal example of the cute book — that is, one in which children or childlike beings wear adult clothes or try to do adult things beyond their limited abilities and fail in ways that make them look silly — endearingly and adorably silly, but silly for sure. I have to admit it: I hate cute. Calling creatures — children or puppies or stuffed moose — "cute" means admiring them for what they can't do: it's not only good to be small, but it's also good to be inadequate. The little moose Elliot eventually gets out of his predicament, as he himself says, the same way he got in — which I interpret to mean, by remaining the cute lamebrain he always was, good to go for yet another adventure stemming from his adorable stupidity (there are already six other cute Elliot Moose stories). Smart and capable children persuaded that adults love them best when they are being "cute" quickly learn to flaunt their inadequacies or pretend inadequacies in order to become just as endearing as dumb old Elliot is. I hope I may be forgiven if I express the humourless opinion that this is *not* a good thing and that it's counterproductive of good parenting to persuade children to act like little bears and little moose of little brain.

That Elliot remains himself and learns nothing from his adventure confirms the central conventional theme of children's literature underlying all these books: it's not merely good to be small or silly, it's just generally good to be anything you already are. It's instructive that doofuses like Elliot or Pooh — apparently representations of full-grown and therefore never-changing adult animals despite their little brains — are such a staple of children's literature. Countless children's books have invited children to stay as they are and be contented with their lot — a perverse thing to do, surely, in light of the fact that they are by definition young and growing and always in the process of becoming not only something else but something more — more knowledgeable, more wise, and ideally, surely, more self-sufficient. But if the books I'm considering here are any evidence, self-sufficiency remains an unpopular goal for parents. Better the kids should model themselves on Pooh and stick their heads in tight places.

In Mary Ann Smith and Katie Smith Millway's *Cappuccina Goes to Town*, illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes, it's a cow who becomes discontented with her life on the boring old farm, decides "it would be more fun to be a person than a cow," and impulsively heads off to town, where she tries on shoes and hats and dresses that don't fit over her hooves and horns and tail, and make her look ever-so-silly in the pictures — terminally cute. Finally, she has a rich insight: "She had wanted to be a person, but she really was just perfect as herself." Just perfect already? How sad. It might be argued that Cappuccina is a cow, not a child, and therefore just a creature for children to laugh at and look down on, not one to identify with and learn from. But she is a cow quite able to enter into conversation with shoe-store clerks and hairdressers — one of a long line of talking animals in children's books, including Cassidy's mouse and Beck's moose, that, as semi-human, semi-animal beings, operate as role models for child readers and offer endless repetitions of the Mr. Rogers litany — "I love you just the way you are" — and its unstated corollary: "Don't you

ever dare to try to be anything else, because I will never ever let you go, you cute stupid little thing you."

Another set of child surrogates are the title animals of Roslyn Schwartz's *The Mole Sisters and the Question*, a book which explicitly raises the central existential question the rest of these books take for granted: "Who are we?" After deciding they are not fish because they don't live in water and not snails because — not incidentally in the context of these books celebrating safe family spaces — they could never live alone, the sisters find a stunningly unsurprising answer to their question: "We're the mole sisters, of course!" Of course. They are what they are, and will always be so, and isn't that ever so reassuring and ever so cute? Another book about these self-satisfied siblings, *The Mole Sisters and the Cool Breeze*, confirms their extreme cuteness by showing how their efforts to produce a breeze on a hot day end up with them being covered ever so adorably in dandelion fluff. I know I am supposed to be charmed — and I guess Schwartz's illustrations are sort of charming, in a soft-edged painted-on-Kleenex sort of way. I suspect Constant Reader would be urgently seeking yet another toilet to get her head positioned over.

While books with child protagonists rather than animal ones are sometimes less steely in their determination to be cute, they are no less determined about persuading children that they're at their best just where they are already — most specifically, safely in the care of their parents. *Emma's Yucky Brother*, an "I Can Read Book" published by an American publisher and illustrated by the American Jennifer Plecas but with a text by the highly respected Canadian writer Jean Little, is an archetypal example. It's a surprisingly undistinguished text for the often interesting Little to have produced, and it's undistinguished in ways that make a distressingly exact model of what's most acceptably conventional in children's books. It describes the trauma Emma, a typically middle-class suburban child in a typically happy two-parent family, undergoes as she deals with the arrival of the new child her family has adopted and decides that "brothers are pests," just like her friend Sally said (Plecas's illustrations, incidentally and again conventionally, reveal that Sally is yet another person of colour playing a supporting role in what then theoretically becomes a multicultural book about a nevertheless typically white protagonist). Emma's anger leads (typically) to the boy separating himself from his new family and running away. After a panicky Emma finds him and (typically) realizes how much she loves him, she accepts the conventional wisdom of what her typically wise father said earlier, after he told her the situation was hard for the boy and Emma said it was hard for her, too: "Yes it is . . . , but soon it will be easier for both of you." Easier it indeed soon is — and much more congruent with conventional ideas about bonding, togetherness, and the acceptance of adult wisdom that makes children safe and families happy. Just once, someday, I'd like to read a children's book about a child coping with bad feelings toward another family member who retains even just a few sparse shreds of negative feelings at odds with parental desires even at the end. Just once.

Two books by Richard Scrimger, *Bun Bun's Birthday* and *Princess Bun Bun*, both illustrated by Gillian Johnson, also describe how a child foolishly separates herself from her family and then happily accepts adult wisdom and reunites with it. In *Bun Bun's Birthday*, Winifred hides in the closet because she's angry about the party being held for her baby sister Bun Bun instead of for her, until her mother comforts her and gets her to rejoin the happy family group. In *Princess Bun Bun*, Winifred

leaves her parents behind in the lobby as she follows the baby into an elevator in her uncle's building, the Castle apartments, and holds back tears as she imagines herself a beleaguered princess in, of course, a castle, defending the two of them from witches and monsters until they're rescued, not by a knight or a dragon but by her understanding human adult uncle. In both these books, Winifred's conventionally childlike imagination helps her to cope with the problem, but the overall effect is to confirm the rightness of how adults understand her and treat her, to deny that she is capable of being self-reliant, and to insist that being independent is no fun at all anyway.

I don't for a moment want to deny that children need adult supervision and that parents often do know best. I'm simply fascinated by how often children's books in these theoretically advanced times continue to privilege parental protection over even the tiniest amount of independence, and how often they deny or completely obliterate any need for or pleasure taken in independence in doing so. I hate to admit it, but confirming the rightness of adults and repudiating the capabilities of children is probably what makes these books at least potentially saleable. It's instructive, for instance, that the publishers of the Bun Bun books want to push them as being usefully didactic, yet another way to get children to think about things correctly, that is, as adults do: "the story has a very light side," the press release for *Princess Bun Bun* says, "but opens the door to discussions of what could happen if a little one got into an elevator alone." It's clear those discussions are not going to centre on the joys of solitude or self-discovery or even what exciting new things there might be to experience up on the fourteenth floor. Nowadays, it seems, every parent knows for sure that there is nothing but open light sockets, deadly germs, vicious pit bulls, and vile perverts, not only up there on evil fourteen but in fact absolutely everywhere in this terrifying world that the parents themselves or their appointed representatives aren't. Like the existence of gated suburban communities, bottled water, and nanny controls on TV sets, these books indicate the sad truth that irrational adult fears for children are stronger now than they ever were and that children are more constrained and repressed than they ever were. I doubt that the world itself is any more dangerous than it always has been. Adults just spend more time on TV and in the newspapers scaring each other about it. The books are less concerned with representing authentic visions of childhood experience and more with confirming accurate depictions of a mindless adult panic about the safety of little ones.

That these books most centrally insist on the superiority of conventional family togetherness to independence and self-reliance is confirmed in yet one more cute book about non-humans: Allen Morgan's *Quackadack Duck*, illustrated by John Beder. In need of a mother, a newborn duck chooses a troll who, while small and therefore cute, is typical of his species and therefore doesn't like anyone and goes around making trouble, gathering money, and getting rich. After first trying to shoo the duck away, the troll gives in, adopts it and treats it kindly — and apart from some complications involving a cage in a poultry shop in Kensington Market (it's apparently a Toronto troll) and the troll giving up all his cash for love, the two live happily together ever after. This is something like the reverse version of the Bun Bun stories — instead of having and separating from a happy family in order to understand its value, the troll and duck begin as independent outsiders and then create a happy family in order to discover its value. Either way, independence and freedom from the constraints of family turn out to be a bad thing. Solitude is never

anything but sad loneliness.

While child readers are clearly expected to emerge from *Quackadack Duck* with a firm disapproval of more typically anti-social trolls, there's also a contrary expectation that they'll be interested in and enjoy hearing about troll-like behaviour in the first place. It's that sort of assumption that lies behind the huge numbers of children's books that offer readers vicarious experiences of characters who do all the things they're not supposed to do themselves, from farting and belching to heading off for the jungle or the corner store. To some extent, books like *Quackadack Duck* try to have it both ways, offering a tantalizingly entertaining if vicarious experience of the antisocial before firmly and finally condemning it.

Something similar happens in Janet Amsden's *Grizzly Pete and the Ghosts*, also illustrated by John Beder. A creepy group of ghosts, determined to scare the last remaining human, the prospector Pete, away from their town, send the reluctant outsider Spook to do the job. But Grizzly Pete wins Spook's admiration by revealing no fear, and finally he and Spook enter into partnership and leave town together to find gold elsewhere, another family happily beyond their earlier independence. Before that happens, however, the main pleasure of the book is in the delectably malevolent anarchy of the ghosts — if not, indeed, in the mere establishment of the fact that they exist at all. The same pattern recurs once more in Loris Lesynski's *Rocksy*, in which a clumsy girl who is always hurting herself stumbles into Magic Wood, wishes she were made of stone, and turns to solid rock. After a cursory page or two about the cutely-named Rocksy's happiness over her newfound state, the book goes on at some length and in exacting detail about all the problems with it, from being too heavy for a bike-ride to having gritty hair, crying pebbles instead of tears, and becoming increasingly unable to move her lips and talk. Being made of stone is, it seems, a metaphor for being emotionally disconnected from others, along the lines of the psychological theories of Wilhelm Reich and as earlier expressed in another, much more involving and unsettling children's picture book about a creature hardened by experience, William Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (1969). Seriously devoid of the artistry and subtlety of Steig, *Rocksy* makes its opinion about moving beyond the pale of conventional normalcy as obvious as the huge caps it expresses it in:

> The rule about the Magic Wood
> Was always
> STAY AWAY.

But the book itself does not stay away. It banks on readers' pleasure in the fun of a trip to a fantasy world where marvellous unusual things can happen even while pronouncing against it.

Jane Gray's *Princess Backwards*, illustrated by Liz Milkau, is similarly self-contradictory. A princess, Fred by name, lives in a land where everything is backwards — her dad is king Nancy, and that is not a gay joke. Fred, an outsider because she gets everything wrong by doing it in the way usual in our own world, saves the castle from a dragon by running backwards — that is, what we would call forwards — and teaches the guards how to shoot backwards — that is, looking at their targets instead of shooting over their shoulders. It's a typical underdog story, except in this case, the outsider is outside because she acts the way insiders in our own world would normally do, and so the triumph of the underdog is a tri-

umph for normal overdog values, and the conclusion — "no one thought there was anything wrong about Fred being different . . . sometimes, different is a lovely thing to be" — is utterly and completely insincere. On the other hand, the main pleasure the book attempts to offer is, surely, the supposedly wacky difference of the backward world, in which dinner is in the morning and breakfast in the evening and people turn chairs upside down and sit on the rungs. As well as condemning the weirdness it evokes itself, Princess Backwards undermines its own case for normalcy simply by trying to evoke the pleasure of that weirdness in the first place. Indeed, if the book is less interesting than it might be, it's because it's not wacky enough — the punctuation remains at the end of the backwards sentences people speak, and the princess wears her dress frontwards even while trying to walk backward.

I realize, suddenly, that I've said nothing about the illustrations in any of this group of cutely conventional books about how wonderful it is for children to be incapable, families to be together, and normalcy to be the norm. I suspect it's because there is not much to say. Considered as a group, these books have the most undistinguished pictures of all the books I'm reviewing here. Chirpily cheerful cartoons, most often in pastel hues, unsaturated, without much intensity, and with lots of white paper showing in and around them, they tend to look a lot like each other. (*Grizzly Pete*, by virtue of a modicum of dark intensity, and *Princess Backwards*, by virtue of incompetent drawing that tries for but fails to achieve the desired degree of chirpiness, are exceptions.) These pictures tend, in fact, to look cute — to look like the blissfully insouciant world without shadows that so many adults like to imagine children see around them when they're being most conventionally childlike. Perhaps it's not surprising that books so ardently determined to support the joys of conventionality should contain pictures so conventional and so untouched by the individualizing imaginativeness they tend to disparage.

Law and Disorder

There's an old cliché about there being really only two stories. In one, a person goes on a journey, as in the *Odyssey* or *On the Road*, and in the other, a stranger comes to town, as in *Oedipus Rex* or *Teenagers from Outer Space*. In children's literature, this translates into two basic stories about home: children or childlike animals leave home in order to have dangerously exciting adventures elsewhere, as in classic books like Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) and Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), or else their homes are invaded by something or someone excitingly alien to it, as in Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). For every book that offers entry into an anarchic world beyond the pale of reason and normalcy only in order to return to and reaffirm the need for the pale, there seems to be another that celebrates the crazy, exciting dangers of outside by bringing them inside and letting anarchy rule — at least for a while.

The first of these groups is represented by three similar and similarly conventional books about small animals whose exuberant indulgence in uncontrolled animal spirits moves them beyond the pale of safety and into an extended sequence of disruptively exciting encounters with others that are nevertheless frenetic and exhausting enough to warrant the need for the safe return home that each text excessively dwells on as it ends. Eugenie Fernandes's *Busy Little Mouse* (a sequel to an earlier book, *Sleepy Little Mouse* [2000], about the same rodent) describes how the

hyperactive mouse bumps into a dog who swims with a pig who hugs a sheep and so on. The mouse appears in each illustration, happily supervising the anarchic interspecies confusion it has initiated until it's time for home and bed. Without much in the way of a story, this book has no obvious message to communicate. But the matter-of-factness with which it depicts both the joyful troublemaking of this childlike being and the safe security of the home and the traditionally aproned and long-skirted momma mouse it returns to makes *Busy Little Mouse* a particularly telling expression of common assumptions about what children are or should be — essentially hare-brained enough both to create chaos and to need their chaos constrained. For all their effort to be energetic, Kim Fernandes's three-dimensional illustrations, constructed from the modelling clay Fimo, retain the fixed quality of sculpture and thus undercut the exuberant frenzy they depict — a good thing, for I'm sure a more convincing depiction of a "timid little sheep" hiding under what appears to be an overfriendly cow as the voyeuristic Little Mouse surreptitiously peeps at them from behind his hat would not be quite so charming. It looks a lot like miscegenation as it is. Sheryl McFarlane's *This Is the Dog*, a sort of rewriting of "This is the House that Jack Built" illustrated from a lot of intriguingly disruptive points of view by Chrissie Wysotski, offers a similar series of humorous disasters, as the dog, "too excited to stay," escapes the yard and then proceeds to disrupt various human parties, stealing a hot dog, a cookie, a fish, and a frisbee in the process until he's finally returned home for a bath and a snack and a comforting rest. Once more, child readers are asked to both enjoy a theoretically forbidden anarchy and also understand why it's forbidden — why dangerously uncontrolled beings such as puppies and human children need others to keep them safe from themselves. A somewhat more complicated version of what is nevertheless the same old story, Maria Coffey's *A Cat Adrift*, illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes and a sequel to two previous books about the same disruptive feline (*A Cat in a Kayak* [1998] and *A Seal in the Family* [1999]), describes how the cat Teelo chases a rat out of the house, falls into the ocean, and drifts through dangers on a log until rescued by a girl and her grandfather on a boat, where the cat continues to cause cute trouble until the boat sails near the cat's old home and both his owners claim him. A compromise makes everyone one big happy family, thus confirming that disorderly behaviour deserves — nay, requires — the reward of a safely constraining home.

All three of these books allow the vicarious experience of disorder primarily to confirm the need for control. But I can't deny that allowing the disorder has the interesting side effect of making lack of control look interesting and thus undermining the control. Books of the second sort I mentioned earlier — ones describing strangers coming to town — tend to be more forthright in their celebration of the carnivalesque playfulness the intruders so often represent. Not surprisingly, however, the anarchy of these anarchy-confirming books is undermined by the conventionality that frames and underlies them just as much as the conventionality of convention-affirming books is undermined by the anarchy they describe. We can recognize anarchy as such only because we are familiar with the order it transgresses, and so it reinforces the normalcy of that order even in the act of transgressing it.

Ruth Miller's *The Bear on the Bed*, illustrated by Bill Slavin, is an excellent example. If there's anything entertaining in a story about a shaggedy-headed creature of the wilds who breaks into a cabin and then uncontrollably bounces, snoozes, dances, and finally poops on a girl's bed, then it has to be the transgressive nature of the

acts it describes — the intrusion of wild anarchy into a place of civilized order. It's only funny and brave to talk about pooping when you know that you're not supposed to and that people, especially adults, generally don't. That the act of transgression is being performed by an adult author and illustrator and will have been sanctioned for child listeners by adult book purchasers merely confirms the degree to which it supports norms rather than offering them any serious challenge. In Slavin's appropriately exuberant illustrations, meanwhile, the bear's fur and the protagonist's skin share the exact same colour, and the two of them share not only the bed but a similarly-hued teddy bear, a small replica of the bear himself. The implied connections between the intrusively boisterous bear, the acceptably cute fake bear, and the child's self-image are deeply suggestive of our ideas about how children do or should feel about their own tendency to wildness.

More transgressive intruders appear in Bill Richardson's *But If They Do*, illustrated by Marc Mongeau in wonderfully frenetic, luridly-hued, squiggle-filled and somewhat abstract cartoons that look like what would happen if Mickey Mouse fell into a painting by Juan Miro. In Richardson's text, consisting of verse just a smidge too reminiscent of the great work of Dennis Lee, a child who has been told the old phrase about sleeping tight and not letting the bedbugs bite imagines first the bedbugs and then ghouls, monsters, and vampires showing up in his or her bedroom. But rather than just being frustrated and stymied like the girl with the bear problem, this child offers to give as good as he or she might get, promising to match transgression with transgression and do deliciously anti-social things like "make 'em eat a stinky stew / Of goop and rusty nails" and "dunk 'em in the garbage can / And cover 'em in dirt." It's interesting to compare this bedtime book with the ones I discussed earlier about drowsy children being bored into sleep by unintentionally bad poetry about night sounds and such. Here, the deliberately bad verse allows sleep through an energetic expression and purging of imaginative energy that shows a child not being passive but taking control. While there's not much that's fresh or new here (think of Sendak's *Wild Things* or, for that matter, Lee's *Lizzy's Lion* [1984]), I still have to admire the respect this book shows for children and for their need for and ability to both blow off steam and have mastery of their own fears and lives. *Sally Dog Little*, another book by Richardson illustrated in a somewhat less wacky and less satisfying style by Céline Malépart, also offers a protagonist who deals both with intruders and with questions of anarchy and control. The dog, Sally, lives with a human family with "very, very formal" parents. She manages to be the "proper" dog they want until a ghost pirate and his ghost dog stroll through the living room wall one night and she barks at them to warn the humans as proper dogs do — much to the annoyance of the human adults, who can't see the ghosts and think she's being decidedly improper. Later, when the ghosts give Sally the treasure she helped them dig up, she decides to keep it safely buried and unknown to her humans — just like her encounter with pirates and her ability to move beyond the pale of propriety in ways that might surprise and enrich them if they allowed themselves to know about it. *Sally Dog Little* is a textbook example of how children's literature works to show child readers what aspects of their thoughts and behaviour need to be hidden from adults and how to both do the hiding and find safer ways of expressing and releasing what must be hidden.

In its revelation of what really happened to Sally beyond the ken of adult-defined propriety, *Sally Dog Little*, paradoxically and intriguingly, takes both of the two opposing sides of an age-old conflict: being both complicit with children in

their need for independence and self-expression and complicit with the adult project of showing children how to be — or seem to be — "proper" and appropriately childlike. Barbara Todd's *The Rainmaker*, ilustrated by Rogé, makes the adult need to teach children how to be appropriately anarchic and playful even clearer. This time, the diorderly adult actually appears in the book itself, in the form of the Rainmaker, a deceptively serious-looking adult chap with black hat and a long black coat and a black beard that makes him look like a Chasidic rabbi. A child more childlike than children, like his precursor Mary Poppins, the Rainmaker shows up after Clarence turns a tap labelled rain (we are told the "D" might be worn off) and rain starts to fall, offering adults umbrellas that have handles made of real ducks that quack or that cause rain to fall only inside them. Eventually, he teaches Clarence how to make similarly strange rain-oriented mischief all by himself — including a Mary-Poppins-like ability to fly with an umbrella.

A more resistant child appears in Anne Laurel Carter's *Circus Play*, illustrated by Joanne Fitzgerald. This child just wants to watch TV, but his friends have come over to watch his clearly atypical and norm-defying mom practice her trapeze act over their heads in the living room, after which they get into the Circus Costume Box and defy convention as they imagine themselves as animals and lion tamers and in jungles and rocket ships. Offended by the disorder, our hero tries desperately to maintain an appropriate adult propriety: "Yesterday," he says, "the kids left a terrible mess, juggling pins and mile-long scarves everywhere." But eventually, of course, joyous anarchy rules, and our relectant hero gets caught up in the childish play and even literally caught up in the air to become part of his mother's act, finally as childlike as she always was. Fitzgerald's delicately whimsical pictures show a boringly mundane living room through which Mom's frenetic shadow begins to fly, as she presides, the resident goddess of play, over a nicely orchestrated transformation into the exotic places the children imagine until the real living room slowly returns once more. I wouldn't have thought such gentle pictures could work with a text so clearly committed to excess, but in fact they do much to make its exuberance palatable.

In Ian Wallace's *The True Story of Trapper Jack's Left Big Toe*, yet another wild adult represents a delightful disorder intruding into the safe lives of children, this time as the subject of one of "the wildest stories that I'd ever heard." After moving to Dawson City, Josh's new friend Gabe tells him that gutsy old Trapper Jack's left big toe, claimed by frostbite when he was lost in a wild snowstorm while out on his trapline beyond the pale of the town, is kept inside a tobacco tin behind the bar of the Sourdough Saloon. For no obvious reason — although I imagine Sigmund Freud could have come up with one — the lopped-off toe intrigues and completely preoccupies the boys. It's so horrid, so wild, that it's fascinating, and it clearly represents an excitingly dangerous transgression — something that becomes evident as the boys approach the Saloon hoping to see it and find a sign on the door: "YOU MUST BE 18 TO ENTER THESE DOORS FELLA. OTHERWISE BE DUST." After they get Trapper Jack himself to bring out the disturbing object and show it to them, an equally transgressive three-legged dog snaps it up and takes off with it, and then Josh claims he sees a raven flying with the toe in its beak, leading the others to a prolonged bout of laughter at his telling "the wildest story they'd ever heard" — a story that signals his initiation into the spirit of Dawson City, which Jack says is a place "as wild 'n untamed as a grizzly." On the evidence presented here, it seems to be a place that likes to imagine and tell deliciously scary tales

about its own wildness much more than actually experience anything truly wild. As a story about the telling of wild stories and about how telling them allows a safely vicarious experience of horrors one would much rather not experience in reality, this book successfully encapsulates the dynamic at work in all these books about indulging in anarchy. Wallace's typically elegant pictures, which depict black, shriveled toes and excited mangy mutts with a calm, careful artistry and stillness we might more likely expect of depictions of serene ladies in seventeenth-century Dutch interiors, demonstrate well the claustrophobia of the safe spaces in which wildness becomes allowable.

Why wildness might be frightening and need controlling becomes clear in Marie Day's *Edward the "Crazy Man,"* which tries hard to make being "crazy" an admirable thing — something as boisterously harmless and entertaining as Day's Quentin Blake-like illustrations. But the book actually makes life beyond the pale of normalcy seem pretty terrifying, simply by revealing the brutal truth that underlies this celebration of people and other beings out of control. Being out of control is actually a diagnosable disease. "Because of his illness," the text tells us, Edward "kept hearing voices in his head, and even with the best medication available, it was hard to act 'normal.'" That explains why he wanders the streets, a homeless person making himself fantastic costumes out of garbage. Day tries very hard to make us admire Edward as a spirit of joyful abnormalcy, having him first save young Charlie's life by pushing him from the path of a passing car and then later save an older Charlie's bacon by designing an extravagant costume for a rock star after a grateful Charlie finds him and hires him to work for his costume company. Theoretically, the point is that being "crazy" is sometimes a good thing, just as in the other books I've been discussing, but the ever-so-politically-correct quotation marks around the word give the game away. Charlie isn't, as one of the thoughtless children says, anything so despicable as a "nutcase" (again allowable only within quotation marks), nor even anything so celebratory as a free-spirited wild and crazy guy. He's just a poor, sick man for whom we should feel sorry, and his "craziness" becomes acceptable and truly worth celebrating only when it turns out to have monetary value in an unquestioned and unquestionably normal commercial culture. In placing its celebration of a playfully disorderly adult in the context of real illness and real value, this book reveals the extent to which all these books allow anarchy only in ways that strive desperately to establish firm boundaries between it and the rules and garrisons that protect children from it — to preserve standard ideas of normalcy.

As I've suggested, nevertheless, these books also reveal a fascination with anarchy and a belief that children should indulge in it and be happy when adults offer them safe ways to do so. For adults in our time, there's almost always ambivalence about the relative merits of playfulness and obedience and about the relative dangers and pleasures of disorder. In her informational book *Jessica's X-Ray*, for instance, Pat Zonta makes it clear that it's unsettling to break your arm and focuses, as so many of the books I'm reviewing do, on reassurance: don't worry, kiddies, no matter what awful mess you get into, adults will always make it better. But as the book's cover enthusiastically announces, this informational book "includes actual X-Rays!" In other words, it offers the thrill of transgression — of seeing beyond the normal boundaries of flesh into lungs with swallowed coins and freakish bug-eyed skulls and the wombs of pregnant women. In order to justify the inclusion of these excitingly transgressive films, the book happily catalogues a se-

ries of disorderly disasters from bicycle accidents to Jessica's own broken arm. As Jessica herself says, "It had been an exciting day. I got to see inside a lot of people." There's as much transgression here as there is reassurance — enough dangerous excitement to warrant the insistence that everything's perfectly safe.

Jennifer Wolfe's *The Mess*, illustrated by Cindy Revell, perfectly encapsulates this sort of ambivalence. The text expresses horror at the mess in Noah and Emma's house and focuses on descriptions of how they and their parents clean it up. This is already ambivalent in itself, since it's clear that readers are mostly supposed to be enjoying the deliciously chaotic disorder even in the process of its being dissipated. But to add to the ambivalence, the text contains blanks wherever it mentions misplaced objects and provides readers with a page of stickers of words they can use to fill in the blanks any way they wish, again and again in an endless series of possible forms of anarchic mess always being happily cleaned up in exactly the same way. Or is the clean-up so happy? The last sentence of the text announces that, "Before they knew it, the whole house was a mess again." A continual process of tidying up a finally untidy-able never-ending mess — that nicely sums up how all these books both encourage and legislate against the disorderly irrationalities they identify as the essence of the childlike. According to them, childhood itself is a wonderfully charming but dangerously chaotic mess that adults therefore have to work on tidying up, but can never in fact succeed in tidying up, because, well, let's face it, childhood is a wonderful mess.

Positions Taken and Untaken

I've spent much of this review complaining about how conventional the books are — how just plain ho-hum they are, how much like so many other children's picture books. I find myself thinking of the sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu's theory, presented in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), that the work produced by artists in a specific field represents knowledge of the conventions and practices of that field and a position taken in relation to them. From this viewpoint, the most interesting books are the ones that refer to and reveal knowledge of the tradition they emerge from but that do so in ways that spell out their differences from it — that take a unique position in relation to what has gone before. The trouble with most of the books I've discussed so far in this review is simply that they lack that uniqueness. They take up positions of slavish mimicry — they simply try to duplicate what has already been successful and therefore have no way of distinguishing themselves from what preceded them.

There are, however, a few books that are not so conventional — and, as I'll suggest in a while, some of these are interesting indeed. But not all unconventional books warrant praise. Some less conventional books distinguish themselves simply by revealing no awareness of the field they are trying to enter at all — no idea about what children's literature has been and conventionally still is, no knowledge of what to take a position in relation to. Despite all my loud complaining, reading these books give me a new appreciation for the conventions.

While it has something like the size and shape of a children's picture book, Len Gasparini's *A Christmas for Carol* is actually a short story of the sort that might once have appeared in an adult magazine like *Saturday Evening Post*, a nostalgic memoir about how a boy brings Christmas to the poor girl who lives across the street. There might well be one or two children with an illogical taste for this sort of mawkishly

sentimental nostalgia for the childhood they're still in the middle of ("Oh," I can hear them say, "I'm just ever so delighted to be able to be experiencing the delights of childhood! It just makes me feel tingly and young all over.") But if there are such children, their tastes are not usually taken into consideration by knowledgeable producers of children's books. And while Gasparini's book contains muddy monochromatic illustrations by Aino Anto, there is really no need for them — the narrative has none of the taciturn characteristics of a text written in the knowledge that accompanying pictures will complete its story. While quite different in tone — it's depressingly cute rather than depressingly sentimental — Douglas Arthur Brown's *Archibald's Boo-Boo* is even less taciturn. Despite its picture book appearance and the presence of Bruce John Brown's hectic but confusingly depthless illustrations, it has somewhere in the neighbourhood of 6,000 words of closely-printed text crammed into its 22 pages — enough for about ten typical picture books. But its plot, about an ingenuous troll who confuses a peacock with a giant ear of corn and has to acknowledge that he made a boo-boo instead of successfully shouting "Boo Boo," is hardly enough for even one of those typical books, and most of the many words are unnecessary asides and cute explanations by any annoyingly present narrator who is constantly telling readers how to respond to his story by saying self-satisfied things like "Isn't that odd?" Oddly unlike a picture book, I say, but not odd enough to deserve all that cloying verbiage. While not quite so long, Rick McNair's text for *The Last Unicorn on the Prairies* is equally self-regarding. The story purports to be about a bunch of farm animals who go off in search of the eponymous unicorn, but it is actually about its grandstanding narrator and his theoretically charming inability to ever let a chance for a whimsical remark or a cute turn of phrase slide by unused. The publisher's publicity release says that the author, a storyteller, "has 'test-driven' this hilarious tale at dozens of live shows for kids across the country." I have no doubt that watching a grown man be this silly made children laugh, but putting the performance down on paper accompanied by Chris McVarish-Younger's overstated pictures of horses with come-hither eyes and a curvaceously romanticized prairie where pine trees grow between the grassy meadows in defiance of standard prairie soil conditions does not make it a picture book.

The three books I've just discussed come from small presses as yet not well known for publishing children's books, and they share the same failings: not just a lack of what Bourdieu calls a *habitus* — a feel for the game, a knowledge both conscious and unconscious of what makes picture books work both as examples of their genre and as sellable commodities, but also a lack of regard for the communicative power of pictures and the integral part they play in successful picture books. All three of these overwritten texts could and probably should be told without their pictures — something I wouldn't be willing to say of the vast majority of the more conventional books I found myself critiquing earlier.

That doesn't mean that being unconventional is inherently wrong. One nonconventional book, Ted Goodden's *Glory Boy*, diverges from conventions just as much as *Archibald's Boo-Boo* or *The Last Unicorn* does, but I'm not prepared to condemn it. Self-published, *Glory Boy* might seem at first glance to imply a serious lack of habitus. The text, longer than your average picture book, tells about a boy living alone in the wilderness and the glory-seeking woman he meets there in a way that weirdly intertwines an allegory about ecological concerns and a regard for the environment with a pourquoi tale about how bees began — a combination of children's story elements that seems unlike conventional children's literature once those

elements are combined. Goodden then accompanies this strange tale with his own bold illustrations, which, while immensely accomplished and lovely to look at, are done in a number of different media, including linoprints, stained glass, and collage — not only breaking an unwritten rule that the illustrations in a book should all be in the same medium, but also choosing media that are all inherently unaccommodating to the central concern of narrative illustration with the depiction of action and movement. They are, not surprisingly, static and emblematic — not qualities I usually value in illustrations. Yet somehow, all these elements work to produce an unsettling and involving story experience — a subtly integrated set of words and pictures that, despite their various complexities, actually seem to be telling and showing more than meets the eye. As the book itself describes what explodes from its protagonist's "glory trap" after he tries to turn the delights of nature into gold, it is "beautiful in a strange way." Even though *Glory Boy* involves many conventional elements of children's literature, it does not feel quite like a children's book. Goodden is right to leave unanswered the question he raises in his afterword: "Is this a children's book or an adult book?" It isn't quite either.

One would not be tempted even to raise that question if the book were unusual but more firmly located within the field of children's literature — if, despite its uniqueness, it clearly represented a position taken in relation to others children's books. Such a book would be unquestionably a children's book — merely a very good one. As I've suggested at great length, I found few such books among the ones I'm reviewing here, and despite its excellence I can't count *Glory Boy* among them. But I did come across a few.

As I've suggested a number of times earlier, I often found myself admiring the illustrations in books with competently written but nevertheless less interesting texts: the pictures by Karen Reczuch for *Salmon Creek*, Kirsti Anne Wakelin for *A Pod of Orcas*, Alan and Lea Daniel for *Under a Prairie Sky*, Ludmila Zeman for *Sinbad's Secret*, Stéphane Jorisch for *Anancy and the Haunted House*, Luis Garay for *The Kite*, Dean Griffiths for *That's Hockey*, Kim LaFave for *We'll All Go Flying*, Sheena Lott for *How Sleep Found Tabitha*, and Joanne Fitzgerald for *Circus Play*. These books represent positions taken by illustrators braver and more imaginative than the texts they work with seemed to demand — a bravery which itself reveals a feel for the field of picture books, which for no clear reason tends to allow and reward sophistication and innovation in illustrations far more than it does in texts. Perhaps it's because so many adults believe, incorrectly, that children can't understand difficult verbal experiences but that pictures can communicate successfully even to those without knowledge of the complexities of their semiotic codes? At any rate, these illustrators, all producing work quite different from each other, manage to make expectably conventional texts into intriguingly unconventional story experiences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I've not found any books that match decidedly weaker pictures with strong texts — in the current field of picture books, that almost never happens. But I'm happy to report a few cases where texts and pictures work together as equal partners to create satisfying story experiences, as picture books ideally ought to do. A few of these I've discussed earlier: Blair Drawson's *All Along the River* and Bill Richardson and Marc Mongeau's *But If They Do*. There are two others I've left to discuss here at the end, as a redeeming bit of tasty dessert after a determinedly nutritious but desperately stodgy banquet.

There isn't much to Dayle Ann Dodd's *Where's Pup*. It consists of a taciturn series of rhymed questions and answers:

Where's Pup?
Don't know.
Go Ask Jo.

Pierre Pratt's pictures reveal that the setting is a circus, that the question is being asked by a clown, and finally, that Pup can be found by looking up to where he perches on a chair held by the top member of a pyramid of muscular acrobats. That's it. That's all. But this is an artistic simplicity that reveals a deeply sophisticated knowledge of picture book art. Dodd's text is so simple as to completely avoid any whiff of a hint that it wants its audience to be anything different than it is already — it's just there with its simple rhythms and rhymes to give pleasure, nothing more. Pratt's pictures, of comically eccentric circus characters, are both pleasing to look at as art and eminently capable of communicating story information. The apparent excess of their highly saturated colours is balanced by a tasteful reticence — not only are the drawings efficiently minimal, but the book's gimmick, a tall scene folding out of the top of a page to reveal the pyramid pup perches on, is used just once and saved for an unexpected bravura finish. The text needs the pictures — and it wisely leaves a vast number of story-telling elements for it to fill in. The pictures, a little less obviously, need the text, for this would be a less compelling experience if the text weren't there to create the repetitive patterns and the suspense that allows the pictures to tell a specific story rather than just a widely interpretable sequence. Together, they offer an admittedly small but intensely good experience for readers of all ages who like the specific pleasures the children's picture book has to offer.

At first glance, the last book I'll discuss, Nan Gregory's *Amber Waiting*, illustrated by Kady MacDonald Denton, seems like yet another aggressively reassuring book about how children are wrong to be afraid of what adults think they're afraid of and how parents are inevitably and always right when they say there's nothing to fear. It begins by listing good things about kindergarten. But then it turns to bad things — especially, that Amber's dad doesn't show up to pick her up when it's over and leaves her waiting alone in the hallway. The text then describes, and the pictures show, what Amber imagines as she waits — her dad alone on the moon, anxiously awaiting as she gallivants around the world, doing exciting things that dads everywhere marvel at until she goes back to get her own father, who will forever after be there already with all the other late dads and moms as soon as kindergarten's out. Not only does the book allow the child the power to imagine herself in charge despite or because of bad parenting, but the book even confirms that she was right to be upset in ways that challenge parental rectitude and allow her to preserve her independence as well as her love for her father. Dad finally breezes in late, so blithely unconcerned he doesn't even see a reason to offer excuses — one of the rare fathers in picture books human enough to not be so totally caught up in his daughter's needs that he has actually not thought about her at all, but capable, nevertheless, of understanding what he's done when clever Amber finds a way of making him know, by asking him if he's ever been alone on the moon. And once he gets it, he apologizes, like the humanly thoughtless mensch he is. This all seems not only to be convincingly real, but it is also real in a way that respects both children and parents and their existence as separate beings each capable of solving their own problems, as both Amber and Dad do here. Denton's illustrations are gentle cartoons in soft pastels that turn dark and angry in the fan-

tasy sequences — visual expressions of the complex dark emotions Amber feels but that the text leaves unspoken as it describes what she imagines without ever needing to say why. *Amber Waiting* reveals an awareness of a long and noble history of previous picture books showing what goes on in children's minds — *Where the Wild Things Are* is a prime example — but offers a subtle and interesting variation on them. It is, quite simply, an excellent picture book.

Cagey Conclusion

I began this review upset that so many of these books were so boringly conventional. Having now taken a closer look at them and done some exploring of why they are the way they are, I'm finding myself thinking it's a miracle that books of the calibre of *Where's Pup* and *Amber Waiting* can continue to be published at all. Children's literature is a commodity — a marketable product increasingly controlled by market forces quite untroubled by concerns for quality or excellence. It takes daring and exceedingly cagey writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers to produce interesting books in this depressing context. Anyone who cares for picture books needs to be deeply thankful that there do continue to be even a few.

Note

1 According to the 2003 census, there were 79,300 fewer Canadians between the ages of ten and nineteen than there were between the ages of 20 to 29, and 504,500 fewer Canadians between the ages of zero and nine than there were between the ages of ten and nineteen ("Canadian Statistics — Population by Sex and Age Group"). The birth rate in Canada declined from 11.2 births per 1,000 population in 1998-1999 to 10.6 in 2002-2003 ("Canadian Statistics — Births and Birth Rate").

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