the explosion, she can rebuild her world. With this, she comes to the same realization that struck Rachel, Margit, Sophie Mandel, and Emmaline Roke: that it is possible to start over. The Irish Chain has another meaning that makes it a fitting symbol for this genre as a whole. For Rose, it represents how a range of personal experiences come together into a family's history. The quilt is, in itself, a kind of mosaic, and the cultural mosaic that these books describe is, like the quilt, more than the sum of its parts.

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Giggling Helplessly in the Middle Years / *Margaret Steffler*

Stinky. The Kids from Monkey Mountain 6. Ted Staunton. Red Deer, 2002. 63 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-263-9.

Trouble With Girls. The Kids from Monkey Mountain 7. Ted Staunton. Red Deer, 2002. 71 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-264-7.

Dog Days. Becky Citra. Orca, 2003. 93 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-256-0.

The Not-Quite World Famous Scientist. Susan Hughes. Illus. Stephen Taylor. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 93 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-696-0.

Alice and the Birthday Giant. John Green. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000. 38 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-540-9.

Ellen's Terrible TV Troubles. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. John Mardon. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 38 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-527-1.

Emma's Emu. Kenneth Oppel. Illus. Kim LaFave. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 54 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-524-7.

Marilou Cries Wolf. Raymond Plante. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Marie-Claude Favreau. Formac, 2002. 62 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-580-9.

Maddie's Millionaire Dreams. Louise Leblanc. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Formac, 2002. 63 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-578-7.

Fred's Halloween Adventure. Marie-Danielle Croteau. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Bruno St-Aubin. Formac, 2002. 62 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-576-0.

Dear Old Dumpling. Gilles Gauthier. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Pierre-André Derome. Formac, 2002. 61 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-574-4.

The Big Show. Don Trembath. Orca, 2003. 128 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-266-8.

The Spy in the Alley. Melanie Jackson. Orca, 2002. 186 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-207-2.

Noses Are Red. Richard Scrimger. Tundra, 2002. 203 pp. $9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-590-4.

The Secret Life of Owen Skye. Alan Cumyn. Groundwood, 2002. 175 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-517-2.

In his opening address to the University of Ottawa's symposium on Canadian children's literature in 1999, Tim Wynne-Jones referred to the many ages that "lurk" within him. Wynne-Jones's address, recently published in the collection of essays *Windows and Words: A Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English* (2003), identifies among the various ages and stages "an eleven-year-old giggling helplessly over the adventures of *Freddy the Pig*" (16). In *A Guide to Canadian Children's Books* (2003), Deirdre Baker and Ken Setterington list two-and-a-half pages of book titles under the subject heading "Humour" (322-25). Obviously central as a subject and a genre in children's literature in general, humour plays perhaps its most obvious and uproarious role in books for those in the middle years, when seven- to twelve-year-old readers seem poised and primed for laughter. The example used by Wynne-Jones to illustrate the difference between "showing" and "telling" reverberates with the type of exaggerated humour found in books for "middle" readers:

> "After Lydia's phone call, Lyle was hurt and angry." That's a telling sentence. Whereas, "After Lydia's phone call, Lyle photocopied her portrait forty-three times, stapled them to his flesh and threw himself in the fish pond in the lobby of the school." (20)

Our response is to giggle helplessly.

Ted Staunton has recently published books six and seven of the *Kids From Monkey Mountain* series. *Stinky* and *Trouble With Girls*, both part of the Northern Lights Young Novels series from Red Deer Press, treat poignant and difficult family and social situations with Staunton's usual brand of humour. The strength of these two novels is found in the narrative point of view. Told from the third-person limited perspective, we see and hear events as they affect Janice/Greer Noonan in *Stinky* and as they unfold for Jeff Winslow in *Trouble With Girls*. The approach allows readers to establish a close and sympathetic relationship with the main character in each book. Staunton's use of a different character's point of view for each book in the series allows us to see the same community and even the same events through two or more characters' eyes, drawing our empathy first one way and then another, thus promoting an understanding of how different things can look, depending on where we stand. Janice must deal with the separation of her parents and the cruelty of her classmates, which produce both sadness and stress. Staunton captures Janice's feelings of alienation as she "stands in the tatters of her day as kids stream past her, back inside" (48), as well as her moments of tension, one of which "stretches out so taut that Janice thinks the world will snap in two" (61). The humour relieves the pain without ignoring or denying its existence. Much of the con-

flict and humour in *Trouble With Girls* arises from Jeff's attempts to "do what he's supposed to" (5) even when the demand to do so results in contradictory or impossible situations. These novels will be familiar territory for readers who are following the series, but they are also accessible to those who are not. They may send young readers to seek more of Staunton's humorous empathy in the earlier volumes of the series and also leave them anticipating the publication of more books about the kids from Monkey Mountain.

One of the strongest books in this group of humorous stories for young readers is Becky Citra's *Dog Days*. This Orca Young Reader is fairly "off the wall" in its humour, especially when compared with Citra's historical series about Max and Ellie. The eccentric characters, particularly Gramp, confuse and frustrate the main character, Brady, but delight the reader. When Gramp, who is revealed as "nothing but a crazy old cheater" (62) in Crazy Eights, denies the accusation, we laugh, despite Brady's predicament. Brady eventually takes a risk that moves him over into the eccentric camp inhabited by Gramp, where he applies humour and finds acceptance and relief.

Another engaging book in this humourous genre is *The Not-Quite World Famous Scientist* by Susan Hughes. This First Flight chapter book by the author of *Canada Invents* (2002) incorporates directions for the three science fair projects introduced in the course of the novel. Italicized sections describing the dreams of Alexandra Bointon give readers insight into her personality in a novel that presents events primarily through her eyes. As Alex finds out about the secretive Keith, so the reader also unravels the mysteries and apparent contradictions of Alex's science partner. Examples of humour are found in Alex's excuses to avoid spending time with Keith — she has to wash her dog and get her skates sharpened — and in the characterization of Alex's teenaged sister, Flo, who is silent, dresses in black, and has spiky hair. Careful readers who examine the preliminary pages of the book will notice that it is dedicated "To the real Alex, my totally terrific niece," which would make Susan Hughes the character of Aunt Karen in the novel. Middle readers will enjoy making that connection between "real life" and the fictional world.

Three First Flight books among the books under review deal with unwanted appearances — of a giant, of television characters, and of an emu. Each of these books is enhanced by illustrations that delve into the unwanted action of the intruders and the arising complications. Maryann Kovalski's illustrations in John Green's *Alice and the Birthday Giant* do not disappoint. When the giant in full-page height on page nineteen throws open the basement door to greet the birthday party, the havoc created is definitely hilarious. John Mardon's illustrations of the characters that escape from Ellen's television set in Rachna Gilmore's *Ellen's Terrible TV Troubles* play up the panic that results from the unfamiliar lack of control experienced by someone who is used to operating and pointing the remote control. Kenneth Oppel's chapter book *Emma's Emu*, aimed at slightly older readers, is also illustrated in a way to highlight the humour. Kim LaFave's black-and-white line drawings outline simply but effectively the frustration felt by Emma, eliciting the laughter of the reader as Emma hides and rides an emu before succeeding in getting rid of it. These three accomplished writers, known to readers for other works such as *There's a Dragon in My Closet* (Green), *A Screaming Kind of Day* (Gilmore), and the Silverwing saga (Oppel), incorporate their humour in an apparently effortless manner. The three books under review here definitely inspire the helpless giggles that Wynne-Jones recalls in his own past and reading.

With Raymond Plante's *Marilou Cries Wolf*, a Formac First Novel, we move from the appearance of unwanted creatures to the imaginary creation of non-existent creatures and events. Plante's novel, which he tell us is a "variation on the old tale of the child who cried wolf . . . which originated in the Berry region of central France," reverses the situation so that the bored and reckless Marilou becomes the duped and frantic victim of someone else's scheme. The illustrations by Marie-Claude Favreau and the divisions into short and manageable chapters result in a book that is easily accessible and fairly enticing as it works with the suspense of the increasingly outrageous plans spawned by the boredom enveloping Marilou. Similarly, Louise Leblanc's *Maddie's Millionaire Dreams*, also a Formac First Novel, involves scheming that leads to trouble, inspired this time by greed rather than boredom. Maddie's perceptive insight into human nature and the foibles of those around her gathers her readers onto her side as she assesses and judges others: "Depressing! My brothers are hopeless consumers, and Dad is incapable of mashing a banana" (10). A self-reflexive postmodern twist at the end involves Maddie deciding to write the very book we are reading in order to help others "avoid the trap that [she] fell into" and in order to "be wildly successful" and "make lots of money" (63).

Two other Formac First Novels, Marie-Danielle Croteau's *Fred's Halloween Adventure* and Gilles Gauthier's *Dear Old Dumpling*, belong to series that follow specific characters and their pets. Although these books can be read on their own, readers may be bothered by references to events and characters outside of these current volumes. *Fred's Halloween Adventure* has some uncertain moments but holds the reader's interest through its fairy tale allusions, the invitation into the interior space of a pumpkin, and the view of the outer world from that pumpkin's vantage point. Some touching moments, such as Fred's discovery that "there is magic in restoring a little piece of happiness to someone who has lost it" (33), result in a range of tones within the predominantly humourous novel. *Dear Old Dumpling* will have more of an impact on readers who are familiar with Mooch, a canine character from earlier books in the series, whose presence continues to haunt Carl and the pages of this book.

Don Trembath's *The Big Show*, part of the Black Belt Series, is a longer and more challenging novel geared towards accomplished and older middle readers. The humour touches serious subjects, such as the stresses facing single mothers limited by low incomes and the effects of eating disorders. Charles, for example, publicly attacks his sister, Crystal, with the following diatribe:

> "Are you going to get some more of that stuff? That fast-acting gunk that cleans your tubes out all the time?" Charlie turned to Sidney. "My sister's been backed up a lot lately. It's got to do with her eating habits. She likes to stay slim so she doesn't eat." (19)

Discussions about mothers going through mid-life crises, depression, and therapy are treated with a guarded humour.

Melanie Jackson's first novel, *The Spy in the Alley*, also for the older group of middle readers, incorporates humour at its zaniest. It is labelled a "Dinah Galloway Mystery," suggesting that there will be more to follow. Indeed, the second in the series, *The Man in the Moonstone* (2003), has already been published and a third volume is due out in fall 2004. Eleven-year-old Dinah is an eccentric character bor-

dering on the bizarre, while other characters in the novel are definitely strange. The novel is full of diverse people, groups, events, and action to the point of confusion. It requires careful reading that may try the patience of readers eager to be entertained.

Richard Scrimger's *Noses Are Red* is the third in the Norbert and Alan Dingwall series. This novel is appealing from the very beginning through the casual, personable, and self-deprecatory tone established in the "Acknowledgements," in which Scrimger tells us that we "may find a number of words in the text unfamiliar. That's because I made them up." Alan, the first-person narrator, draws us into his situation and story by directly addressing the reader: "My parents are divorced. No big deal. Maybe yours are too" (2). The chapter titles in themselves, printed at the top of each right-hand page, are enough to bring forth chortles of laughter from the reader each time they are glimpsed. My favourite is "I am Dougal," an identifier for being and feeling out of place, based on Alan's memory of Dougal, the "strange Scottish kid" who appeared for a short time in Grade 4: "Dougal was our age, and size, but he wore short pants and striped socks, and spoke with a broad Scottish accent. And he couldn't skate — something as natural as breathing to us. As far as we were concerned, he might have been a different species" (148-49). Ranging north from Cobourg, Ontario, into the Peterborough area, the novel's settings and action take us from one disastrous situation to another, the humour intensified by Norbert's presence and voice inside Alan's nose. Scrimger's novel is extremely funny and successfully integrates the humour with the relationships that develop among characters as the novel progresses.

Equally successful as a humourous novel is Alan Cumyn's first novel for young readers, *The Secret Life of Owen Skye*. Episodic in structure, the novel pursues a number of different storylines that manages to anchor them in Owen Skye, the character with whom the novel begins and ends and from whose point of view the events involving Owen and his two brothers are experienced and narrated. Ridiculous situations such as Owen's father stuck in the roof, "wedged in tight at the thigh, with his other leg splayed across the roof at an awkward angle" (19), are transformed from tragedies into opportunities; Owen gazes through the hole as he lies "in bed and look[s] up at the stars, to see possibilities where there had only been wood before" (23). The discussion of the probable existence and role of the Bog Man's wife introduces humour into the terror as Leonard asks why he would need a wife — "To clean the swamp? Iron his boggy shirts? Fold his moldy socks?" (28). Romantic liaisons are the source of awkwardness and humour; Owen's love for Sylvia pushes him into embarrassing predicaments. Lorne and Lorraine's hour of marriage finds Lorne at the river rather than the church as he immerses his large feet in the cold water, trying to get them down to the size of his new shoes. The triumphant and humourous climax of the novel occurs when the three brothers arrive home "naked as God made them, mud-splattered and wet, screaming with laughter, with two stolen bicycles" (162). Explanations are impossible; "words couldn't seem to capture the magic and glory of it" (162). Cumyn's foray into children's literature is a great success, which undoubtedly will leave his readers wanting more.

Stephen Leacock has noted that "humour is essentially a comforter, reconciling us to things as they are in contrast to things as they might be" (*The Garden of Folly* ix; qtd. in Lynch 84). It is not surprising that middle readers approaching adolescence are drawn to a type of humour that leads to comfort and reconciliation with life as

it is. Faced with a world that is not as perfect or as simple as it was once perceived to be, these readers are attracted to a humour that eases them into an acceptance of so much that is less than ideal and greyer than once imagined. All of us benefit from being reminded of the need to be reconciled to things as they are. The best of the humourous works reviewed here nudge us in that direction through the laughter that comforts even as it points out the disparity between the real and the ideal.

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Diverse Settings for Junior Readers: Geographical, Historical, Cultural, Emotional, and Imaginary / *Margaret Steffler*

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The Reunion. Jacqueline Pearce. Orca, 2002. 92 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-230-7.

Summer of Adventures. Ann Alma. Sono Nis, 2002. 144 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-122-4.

Off Season. Eric Walters. Orca, 2003. 162 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-237-4.

A Taste of Perfection. Laura Langston. Stoddart, 2002. 219 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6274-4.

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