

Profile: "A Purple Sort of Girl": Sheree Fitch's Tales of Emergence

• Jeanette Lynes •



Sheree Fitch

Résumé: Les oeuvres de Sheree Fitch nous parlent de l'affirmation de la féminité. Cette dimension est particulièrement perceptible dans ses oeuvres récentes et, surtout, dans son ouvrage en cours de publication, *There's a Mouse in My House*. Ses héroïnes, souvent de très jeunes filles, paraissent, dans l'ensemble, impuissantes devant des forces supérieures, psychologiques ou sociales, qu'elles perçoivent comme incontrôlables. Néanmoins, elles parviennent à s'imposer par la dévouerte de l'imaginaire et la maîtrise du langage. Sheree Fitch établit elle-même une relation entre ses personnages et son expérience en tant que romancière qui a dû lutter pour imposer sa voix. D'où une relation complexe entre l'oeuvre et l'existence, le "sexe" de l'auteur et la création littéraire.

Summary: Sheree Fitch's poetry-narratives tell stories of female emergence. This pattern is particularly apparent in *Sleeping Dragons All Around*, *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen*, *I am Small*, *Mabel Murple*, and her new book, *There's a Mouse in My House*. Her child-protagonists are typically females who, for the most part, initially feel voiceless and powerless when confronted with forces larger than themselves — "forces" which may be internal/psychological or external/societal, or both, but which are, in some way, seemingly uncontrollable. Fitch's young heroines contend with these forces by embracing language, imagination, and creativity. A conversation with Sheree this summer revealed parallels between her female protagonists' emergence and her own development as a woman writer discovering her voice. Fitch's work, then, exhibits a rich interplay between biography and art — an interplay subtly expressive of the

problematics around gender and creativity, and how these problematics figure, in an enabling way, in her writing for children.

Summer sun beads down on Chocolate Lake, Halifax, Nova Scotia, over Sheree Fitch's homey, hip abode. Sheree, sitting across the table from me, wears purple, in good Mabel Murple fashion. Her fingernails are resplendent in tri-coloured ladybug polish. Sheree, full of energy and humour, is well known as a poet, storyteller, and dramatist, and also as an activist in the areas of literacy, children's rights and women's rights. To date, her published books for children include *Toes in My Nose* (1987); *Sleeping Dragons All Around* (1989); *Merry-Go-Day* (1991); *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen* (1992); *I am Small* (1994); *Mabel Murple* (1995); *If You Could Wear My Sneakers* (1997); *The Hullabaloo Bugaboo Day* (1997). She has also published a book of poetry for adults, *In This House Are Many Women* (1992). Her new children's book, *There's a Mouse in My House*, was published by Doubleday in the fall of 1997.

Our afternoon conversation was wide-ranging, covering topics as diverse as dragons, floor polishers, Isaac Watts and sneakers. However, we kept circling back to several key elements central to Sheree's work: the writer's discovery of what she calls a "personal mythology;" gender and children's literature; and the concept of community in children's literature. These elements, only marginally separable for purposes of convenient categorization, inform each other.

Fitch's "personal mythology" is an amalgam of elements, drawn from personal experience, dream, and literary tradition. Although Fitch acknowledges the importance of her literary studies at St. Thomas and Acadia Universities — her "good English profs who made [her] love language" — she places particular emphasis on the everyday: "I think so much of what I've done has been less influenced by, you know, literary mythology, than everyday mythology, which everyone has ... it's like taking the ordinary, and allowing yourself to dream on it enough that it becomes fantastical and mythological to you. But I don't really know how that process works ... you never know how all the influences go in and mix and stir and percolate in your brain." Fitch's "mix and stir" of elements has produced a rich texture, a dynamic imaginative landscape in which the fantastic and the mundane come into play — "monkeys in the kitchen," Keats's dragons in the bedroom — and in which wordplay, tongue-twisters and rhymes reminiscent of the nonsense tradition co-exist with the simplicity of colloquial, childlike voices. Her "personal mythology" is also inevitably grounded in her identity as a female, an important aspect of Fitch's aesthetic, as this piece will presently examine.

The notion of community, in Fitch's writing, is significantly formulated on linguistic grounds. Doing a Masters thesis on children's literature compelled her to examine what the key constituents of that literature are, and for Fitch, "a community of listeners" is of crucial importance if a literature, particularly a literature for children, is to have a viable existence. Recognizing the communal characteristics of orality, of a literature "meant to be spoken out loud," Sheree formulated the term "utterature:" "all literature that is dependent on the human voice and a community of listeners to have its life." This concept feeds readily into the genre of children's poetry, one which, Sheree asserts, "is dependent on rhythm

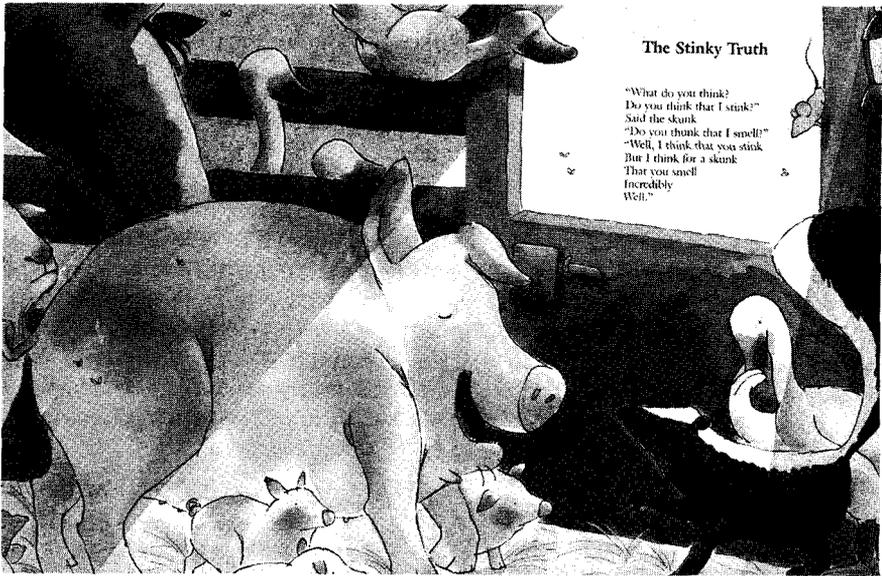


Illustration by Darcia Labrosse, from *If You Could Wear My Sneakers!*

and the human voice ... a thing that's meant to be shared." "The early 'readers' are not readers at all," she says. "What they really are are listeners of the literature, which means it's utterature." "Uttering" strikes Fitch as an appropriate term for reaching out, for moving towards a community of listeners. "I love the origins of the word 'utter'," she says, "which means to 'outer', to take what's inside and to make it out loud."

Fitch's notion that voiced, poetic language is "participatory," communal and expressive of the child's rite of discovery of his or her body, including language acquisition, reaches back to the nursery rhyme form, and to the essential appeal rhythm and rhyme seem always to have had for children. What she calls the "lip-slipperiness of language," the pleasure we experience from it as a sensory, tactile entity, as "a whole body thing" corroborates a prevailing notion, as Constantine Georgiou puts it, that "poetry is considered a language that is natural to childhood ... it stirs within [children] an innate sense of rhythm and rhyme" (112). In his essay, "Why Nursery Rhymes?" Nicholas Tucker isolates the educational value of rhymes of all sorts, designed, he says, "to help a baby master speech" (258). Tucker, like Fitch, recognizes the educative, communal function of rhyme, remarking that "nursery rhymes do much to link children to their inner selves, and also their own age group and to the central archetypes of their own culture" (Tucker 262). Of children's poetic propensities, Fitch remarks that "all kids have this, like, it's innate." Although space restrictions prohibit an extensive examination, at this time, of Fitch's two poetry collections — *Toes in My Nose* and *If You Could Wear My Sneakers* (a collection written about children's rights for UNICEF) — her poems offer a lavish "lip-slipperiness," and a childlike, joyful remaking of the ordinary

world as extraordinary: for example, the monster that the child believes lives under the bathtub plug, “the blug in the plug in the tub.” The communal orality of poetry is continued in Fitch’s storybooks, augmented by open-ended forms which, as Fitch presently discusses, engage the reader’s participation, again, opening out into community.

Having recognized the innate “poeticness” of children, however, Fitch avoids the sentimentalizing around child-poets that critics sometimes succumb to. She urges us to consider an added dimension: the child’s world is not always a poetic one, or even an environment in which creativity is necessarily fostered or valued. Thus, the need to legitimate the child’s creative potential is an important value for Fitch. Even child-poets, with all their innate abilities, cannot flourish in a vacuum. Sheree recognizes, in her own childhood experiences, the importance of having her voice “validated.” “If there hadn’t been certain people,” she says, “like that grade two teacher ... or parents who said, ‘you’ll probably [be a writer] someday’ ... everything else in my world, in the world I lived in, did not encourage.” The following interview excerpt reveals a pivotal experience for Sheree as a child-poet:

JL: Did you always want to be a poet, and did you write poetry as a child?

SF: Ok. When I was seven, my grade two teacher Mrs. Goodwin asked us to write poems, and we all groaned. She said, ‘look, you can write about anything, you can even write about your name, just write.’ And I wrote. My first poem was ‘I’m an itchy Fitch/And I live in a ditch/And I’m not very rich/And I look like a witch/And sometimes I itch.’

JL: You were seven when you wrote that?

SF: I was seven. And she took that poem, and she wrote it on the board, and she had everybody in the class say, ‘I’m an itchy Fitch/And I live in a ditch,’ etc. She validated it ... she said, ‘Sheree, that is a poem,’

This excerpt reflects, obviously, one of the more enabling moments in Fitch’s writing career. However, she also experienced a sense of isolation, probably beginning in high school, when writing “wasn’t cool,” and later, when she sensed a paucity of female mentors — of (living) women writers in her maritime community.¹ Thus, given the importance, for Fitch, of a “personal mythology,” her own emergence as a writer, her own “uttering,” is subtly mirrored in her heroines’ journeys towards a self-affirmation rooted in language and utterance.²

Children’s narratives are predominantly stories of emergence. With the exception of *Toes in My Nose* and *Sneakers*, which are collections of discrete poems, Sheree Fitch’s books engage this pattern. Even more specifically, *Sleeping Dragons*, *Monkeys in My Kitchen*, *I am Small* and *Mabel Murple* are all stories of female emergence. Given Fitch’s remark that “I do think I have used myself in almost every book,” her development of a “personal mythology” is almost inevitably linked to her growth as writer and woman. Without being overtly didactic, Fitch’s female characters subtly fracture stereotypes and expectations around gender. Mabel Murple on her purple motorcycle is (pun intended) no shrinking violet. Fitch also offers her readers a grandma in blue jeans and a female Mountie. When asked about “feminism in children’s literature, and how

important gender is in [her] writing, and how conscious she is of it while crafting a book," Sheree responded:

I really appreciate being asked this, Jeanette. Because people don't always give children's literature its credit and even ask those questions. The funny thing is, you see, in this next book, *There's a Mouse in My House*, the protagonist is a boy. But you know what? Not really, because the mouse is a female. But before I finished this book, Dustin said to me, 'is it going to be a girl or a boy?' I said, 'a girl,' and he said, 'Mom, I think you're really sexist; every book you've written in the last couple of years has all been girls. How about a boy?' And I went... 'oh, my God ...' Like, I hadn't even really seen it. And I said, 'Gosh, Dustin, I guess I do it because I'm a girl' ... And now, in hindsight, when I look back at particular poems ... I know why I was doing it at that particular time in my life, too. But I really think it's essential ... like, *Dragons*, for example. That's about a young girl who's afraid, and she's quiet, quiet, quiet, quiet. What happens, to me, in that book, is not only does she have to face the dragons — that's beside the point — she finds her voice ... she handles the situation ... I can see that now. I didn't see it at the time. And I really believe, knowing where I was in my life, knowing where I'd come from in my life — somebody who had felt voiceless and powerless and fearful — when I look at the time in my life when I wrote that, and what's in that book, it blows me away. Because I think, 'it's there,' I do believe there are as many layers in a children's book as you're willing to go and see.

The *Dragons* protagonist's ability to assert herself, in the end, and banish the dragons, recalls Alice's moment of self-asserting emergence in Carroll's famous story, her "calling the bluff" of the frightening "other": "'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'" (108). Fitch's Dragon girl's assertion is more linguistic in nature, revelling in its own wordly prowess: "'YOU BOLD AND BRUTISH BURSTEN-BELLIED BEASTS .../YOU ... YOU BRASH BUNCH OF BEDRAGGLED DRAGONS .../(...) DRAGONS DREAD/GO BACK TO BED!'" The imagery of bed, sleeping and night time suggests that the dragons may be essentially a psychological manifestation, an inner fear to be overcome.

Willa Wellowby, the protagonist of *Monkeys in My Kitchen*, reveals female empowerment through words even more explicitly than the dragon girl in Fitch's previous book. Faced with the story's problem-premise — the invasion of monkeys — Willa initially attempts to resolve her situation through the agency of others: "I called the police/I called the RCMP." However, she solves her dilemma of how to rid her kitchen of monkeys, or, more symbolically, her domestic world of chaos, through her own intellect: "I think and think (and think)/Then suddenly I had an idea/The solution to save the day/I shouted one word:/'BANANAS!!!' /And all those monkeys stopped." Comparing *Dragons* with *Monkeys*, Fitch remarks, "The Willa Wellowby one, it's not that different, in a way. It's not fear, it's chaos. She's out of control, and she can't get control.... She uses her head, finally ... and comes up with an idea and she saves the day. And what she does is, she uses words. That one word — 'bananas.' So she has found the one word that makes her able to handle what happens. I really think *Monkeys* is about the capacity of the imagination. How we control our thoughts, our imagination, how far we let it go, or how it controls us."



Illustration by Kim LaFave,
from *I Am Small*

It is difficult not to draw some parallels between the girl protagonists' (in *Dragons* and *Monkeys*) discovery of their authority-through-language and Fitch's own discovery of her creative, female voice. Fitch remarks, "I could talk about gender and children's literature forever. But I guess I should say it wasn't conscious at the time, but of course at the same time, when I was finding writing, and listening to my voice, and honouring my voice was at the same time when I was coming into my understanding of what it meant to be a woman and a single parent, and my feminist beliefs and philosophies and I was going to university. So it all ... it has to, at some point, be a reflection of all that."

With respect to Fitch's *I Am Small*, it is equally difficult not to make some equation between the "small" person's emergence into a big, sometimes prohibitive, world, and the woman writer's apprenticeship to her craft. As Lissa Paul remarks in "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature," "[c]hildren, like women, are lumped together as helpless and dependent; creatures to be kept away from the scene of the action and who otherwise ought not to be seen or heard" (150). We are thus reminded of Fitch's Dragon-girl's initial self-surveillance: "I MUST be quiet ... shhhh!Shh!" The girl's story of emergence as a metaphor for the emerging female artist continues in *I Am Small*; the world, in this story geared towards a younger audience than either *Dragons* or *Monkeys*, is clearly not designed for small people:

This is small talking.

I cannot reach the light switch
The glasses in the kitchen cupboard
The taps that turn on water
The ice cubes in the freezer
The towels on the bathroom shelf
Or the clothes hanging in my closet.

Kim LaFave's illustrations compliment the text quite effectively. "Small's" powerlessness, for instance, is strongly underscored in the illustration for: "I walk through a jungle of legs: / Of shins and knee-caps and thighs and hips. / I am always looking up." In the opening sets of illustrations, "Small" is always depicted, true to her name, as small. In the later illustrations, Lafave devotes many more full-page

illustrations to the protagonist, who has, visually, in fact, become quite big, reflecting her empowerment, growth and emergence. As in *Dragons* and *Monkeys*, a central moment of emergence is closely tied to creativity and language:

I pick up books with letters I cannot read
But pretend that I do,
Then pretend that I talk a language only I understand.
It sounds like this:
Melinka melunga preinto jitar — which means,
'Can I have a peanut butter sandwich?'
Sometimes I think of a tune in my head
Then invent all the words to go along with the song.
And it's beautiful.

The power of the child's imagination to create her own symbolic language is celebrated in Fitch's book; it is a power which leads to "Small's" final self-assertion, her positioning of herself "in the world, in the universe:" "I am small. /But I think big." The child's "beautiful" song becomes almost a kind of symbolic code in the way the writer's "personal mythology" might be said to constitute her own unique symbolic language.³ Interestingly, the fact that "Melinka," etc., translates into desire for food suggests a parallel, larger desire for nourishment, for growth. The repeated word "pretend" in the above quotation is really a trope of invention. Becoming inventive and become "big" are closely allied in the story; creativity is empowering.

The inherent sympathy for "Small's" plight could only come about through Fitch's ability to recreate a child's perspective, and to image a prohibitive world as seen from the position of someone diminutive, disempowered — someone, not insignificantly, female. Quite literally, singing her song, Fitch herself experienced a prohibitive world when "a music teacher told [her] to keep [her] mouth shut because [she] was flat." Much later, as a mother and young writer, Fitch struggled against prejudicial dismissal of her literary work: "I was typing up my poems in a subdivision. And I heard my son outside, and the little boy next door said, 'what's your mom doing?' 'Oh, she's typing.' 'Typing what?' 'My mother thinks your mother thinks she's going to be a writer.'" The sense of endeavouring to create in a sometimes inhospitable world reflects why "that little girl [in *I Am Small*] saying 'and it's beautiful' is so important to [Fitch]." "Children," she says, "should be made to think that what they create is fine. It's beautiful."

Whereas the child protagonists in *Dragons*, *Monkeys* and *Small* must grope tentatively towards full presence, the "purple sort of girl" who narrates *Mabel Murple* possesses, from the outset, an awareness of herself as creator, an exuberant confidence which immediately propels her imagination into action. It is interesting, and probably not a coincidence, that although the character Mabel appeared in *Toes*, she did not take on her own full-blown story until later in Fitch's career. "What if..." the story begins, "There was a purple planet /With purple people on it.... And there was a someone just like me /I mean a purple sort of girl." This narrator is readily identified as creator, and names her creation, really a kind of alter-ego for herself: "I must dream up a proper name ... /I've got it! / MABEL

MURPLE!" From that moment on, Mabel is always in motion, eating, drinking, cooking, skiing, riding her bike. But "even Mabel Murple/Has to close her eyes/I wonder if she dreams./Or perhaps when Mabel Murple dreams/She dreams of/Gertrude Green!" The book ends at a beginning, a new creation; it ends with ellipses, encouraging the reader to invent his or her own world for Gertrude Green.

In this way, the torch of invention is passed from narrator to reader; an invitation is extended to the reader to participate in the creative process. The ending of *Mabel Murple* bears similarities to *Monkeys*, which ends when the monkeys banish, but a new adventure is suggested: "But .../I think I saw an elephant/Just open up my door/And I've got this funny feeling/There are/several/hundred/more." Thus the text opens out into the potential for more adventure. Because no one can see the monkeys except for Willa and the reader (they have disappeared by the time the RCMP officer arrives), they suggest a principle of the imagination, partly frightening, partly celebratory, which, like the dragons, can be decoded and come to terms with through language.

Fitch's *Merry-Go-Day* is an open-ended text, as well, in that after spending a day at the carnival, the child-protagonist fails to win the much-coveted purple parrot. However, the text points outside its own narrative boundaries when the parrot appears in fireworks in the night sky, another kind of symbolic code the child apprehends, whispering, "I'll be back next year.... This is goodnight, but not goodbye." The parrot becomes a trope of desire, suggestive of the notion that desire — for parrots, for adventure, exoticism, or whatever — is within reach, and may, when the time is right, be gained through one's own agency.

That Sheree Fitch's stories are open-ended and invitational takes another step towards forging community. Thus, "a community of listeners" can be realized not only through rhyme and rhythm, but also through a story's narrative structure: specifically, its avoidance of closure. The following segment of our conversation reveals the relationship between community and open-ended textuality:

JL: Your stories, to me, don't have a sense of closure. Often, they seem open-ended ... how important is this to you — the notion of leaving the story open?

*SF: Boy, nobody's asked me that before, Jeanette. I think that's a really good question. I'm sure there's probably a deep-seated reason for that. I'm not somebody who likes endings. I mean, as a human being I tend not to think of things in terms of beginning, middle and end. I mean, it's ongoing ... I think Ezra Pound said the finishing up of things does not come easily, in one of his letters ... my marriage, my thesis ... I don't like saying good-bye to people, you know, so that partly says something about me as a person, believing there's always something about to happen as opposed to a finite place of stopping. But I think especially in the children's books, what I love is that even though the monkeys are gone, something exciting might happen tomorrow.... It takes a reader to complete my book. I mean, how can a book be a book if it doesn't get read? So, to me, that's a bit of respect for the reader as well. There's another person on the end receiving these words. Let them now write the elephant coming to our school, and kids have done that to me. Let them write *Gertrude Green*, let them, you know, imagine what happens when the dragons come back. I guess no one has ever pointed that out to me before, but now that you're asking, it does have something to do with what life is about, and what I believe story is about.*



*Illustration by Leslie E. Watts, from
There's a Mouse in My House!*

JL: There's a kind of generosity to that, too. Your books don't have endings, they have invitations that open the readers' imagination, to imagine more.

SF: That's what you hope. You tell me that, Jeanette, that's the best of all: that what you would like is that your work is a point of departure for someone else's imagination and creativity ... I mean, all I wanted was one little book. And now I meet a mother who says 'we have this sleeping-dragons-all-around game that we play. My husband lies on the floor and then pretends he's a dragon and the kids crawl all over him,' and I'm going, 'oh, my God,' because for me, when a book can kind of insinuate its way into your household culture, then it belongs to your family. It becomes a part of your family culture, or your school culture. So when teachers show me, 'look, we did this thing with monkeys in the classroom,' that's the life you want a book to have. Not necessarily your story, but that it's given rise to them. I mean, that's humbling, it's rewarding, and I don't sneeze at it. I'm very grateful.

We are grateful, too, for the "community of listeners" Sheree Fitch's work has forged, and continues to engage. Sheree's new book, *There's a Mouse in My House*, offers, with a surprising twist, another tale of emergence, another celebration of storytelling, enabling confrontation with chaos and fear, accommodation of difference, and the female's assertion of voice so characteristic of her work to date. I had the good fortune, later that afternoon, to have Sheree recite her new mouse story for me, and I was small again, "a purple sort of girl" rediscovering the rich possibilities of story.

Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges Sheree Fitch's generosity, and the time she took from her hectic schedule to provide an interview on June 24, 1997.

The author also thanks Marie Davis for her assistance with this project, and for the interesting e-mail discussions about children's literature.

- 1 From an early age, Fitch had identified writing as her vocation. However, "the reality was, there was no such person [as a woman writer] in Moncton, New Brunswick that I ever knew who was a real writer, so it seemed like, 'yeah, that's a nice dream, but there's not really ... but you can't really grow up and do that [be a writer], because how do you do that?' And I did know about Lucy Maud [Montgomery], but ... I still remember thinking, 'but she's long dead.' You know, there was nobody I knew in my small world who was a writer. So it was a long journey and I always wrote, as a kid."
- 2 It is important to re-emphasize that while I am reading Fitch's stories as narrativized, or metaphorized explorations, of her own quest, as a female, for emergence, authority and voice, she does not write "to formula;" in other words, her narrativization of her own experiences, as a female, were, at the time of composition, incorporated into the text on a sub-conscious level. At the time of composition, Fitch's priority is to "let the poem take [her]." But, she says, "now, in hindsight, when I look back at particular poems, I go, 'Oh, my God,' and I know why I was doing it at that particular time in my life, too." Writing her newest book, *There's a Mouse in My House*, was a similar organic process of discovery for Fitch. "The mouse is a girl," she says, "and what the girl does is tell stories.... And [writing it] when I got to the end of the story, I just cried and cried and cried ... I didn't know."
- 3 The notion of a child's symbolic/secret language, and Fitch's ability, as a writer, to make such a language resonate with her readers/listeners is suggested by her anecdote of a child who approached her [with respect to *I am Small*] "and said, 'you know, when they talk in that language ... melinka melunga ...' ... he went, 'my sister and I do that all the time.' ... And he started to talk to me in his secret language. 'Cause I think he thought I'd understand."

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