

## THE LATEST PICTURE-BOOK HEROINES

**Jessie's Island.** Sheryl McFarlane. Illus. Sheena Lott. Orca Book Publishers, 1992. 32pp., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-920501-76-1; **Katherine and the Garbage Dump.** Martha Morris. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Second Story Press, 1992. 24pp., \$12.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-929005-38-4; **Desdemona Saves the Day.** Eileen Pettigrew. Illus. Tina Seemann. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1992. 32pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-023-7; **Saranohair.** Gillian K. Johnson. Annick Press, 1992. 56 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-211-4; **Melinda's No's Cold.** Gail Chislett. Illus. H el ene Desputeaux. Annick Press, 1991. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-196-7; **Purple, Green and Yellow.** Robert Munsch. Illus. H el ene Desputeaux. Annick Press, 1992. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-255-6; **Jill and the Jogero.** Richard Thompson. Illus. Fran oise Durham-Moulin. Annick Press, 1992. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-5037-245-9; **Amanda's Book.** Kerry Westell. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick Press, 1991. Unpag., \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-185-1; **Megan and the Weather Witch.** Allen Morgan. Illus. Vladyana Krykorka. Oasis Press, 1992. Unpag., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-895092-03-5.

One of the best picture books to come out recently in an impressive display of Canadian talent is Sheryl McFarlane's *Jessie's Island*. In the story, challenged by her cousin about the boring life of island dwellers, Jessie responds by



the bald eagles that summer in our giant fir tree,

outlining all the wonderful things she can see and do in her island home. The book is a celebration of nature and the implicit entertainment available through the natural world. The text is brief, but is effective and gripping. Lott's soft, water-colour illustrations that accompany each of Jessie's descriptions are clear and augment the text beautifully.

Like *Jessie's Island*, *Katherine and the Garbage Dump* by Martha Morris also centres on a problem, one that young Katherine faces when city officials turn her back yard into a garbage dump. Katherine's solution to the problem is environmentally sound, inventive, and shows the child taking charge in a decisive and effective way. Furthermore, the absurdity of the situation will engage the reader as will the spunky, determined and independent heroine. However, the story is weak in places, connections between words and events, or events themselves, not always being clear. Adults are presented consistently as both unreasonable and irrational, which is not necessary since Katherine would come across as very strong even without this authorial emphasis. But overall the story and character are strong enough to override the weaknesses of the text, while the illustrations are wonderfully detailed and evocative, often extending the text in interesting and enlightening ways, particularly in depiction of character.

Like the previous two books, in *Desdemona Saves the Day*, Pettigrew tackles another problem, that of a spendthrift mother. The book works nicely, with a coherent story line and another spunky, problem-solving heroine. Seemann's watercolour pictures capture the characters beautifully, particularly Desdemona's imperturbable mother and her red-faced and distraught father. However, there is some inconsistency in the use of animals in the artwork which may confuse or disappoint perceptive readers, and which weakens the overall effect of the pictures. The other problem with the book is the ending of the story, which portrays adults as irrational and foolish, not able to learn from their mistakes or do anything for themselves.

The rest of the books listed above all fall into the absurd or fantastic categories, but do not deal so much with problems or issues as the first three books. Obviously designed to appeal to children's love of the absurd, most of them work nicely. *Saranohair*, by Gillian Johnson, unfortunately does not work well. The basic idea is wonderfully absurd, the creatures are fantastical and the ending whimsical. The black-and-white pencil drawings have a real appeal, and may remind the adult of Tenniel's *Alice* drawings, an influence on Johnson. But the drawings are not always consistent, which is irritating in places. One character has a squinted right eye in most of the drawings, but a perfectly normal eye in others. There is no reason given, either in the text or the drawings, for this change, making the work seem sloppy. Furthermore, the same sloppiness appears in the writing. For the most part the story is absurd but coherent. When there is a break in the coherence, the absurdity is reduced to stylistic silliness, and again the reader is confused and irritated. Although these two points of inconsistency are minor, they are quite distracting since they erode the reader's sense of trust in the author, a trust particularly



Illustration from *Red, Green and Yellow*

“super-indelible-never-come-off-till-you’re-dead-and-maybe-even-later colouring markers.” Desputeaux’s wonderfully detailed and colourful watercolours enhance both stories, bringing particular energy and life to Munsch’s story.

A less happy marriage between artwork and text is another absurd book, Thompson’s *Jill and the Jogero*. Thompson’s story is clever and funny, although light. Thompson’s story also plays with language, this time creating nonsense words and then finding creatures and actions to bring those words to life. Unfortunately, the pictures do not enhance the story, nor add to it in any way. Durham-Moulin’s plasticine scenarios and characters create frightening, grotesque characters on the whole, particularly in her depiction of the Jogero. Yet the text gives no impression that the Jogero is frightening. Durham-Moulin’s creations lack the subtlety of Barbara Reid’s figures, for example, and there are problems with perspective in places.

*Amanda’s Book*, by Kerry Westell, is an absurd fantasy about a little girl who cuts out things to put in her scrapbook, depriving the world of these things as she does so. While delightful, this story has a more serious undertone, that of the danger of selfishly possessing or hoarding things and thus depriving others of the pleasure or use of them. But Westell keeps the tone of the book light, and Amanda’s sense of control is likely to appeal to the child reader. Ohi’s often muted but detailed and explicit drawings capture the story’s absurdity, often jumbling things together in a collage, which works very well to both enhance the text and add to the atmosphere of increasing confusion and disarray in the outside world.

Morgan’s *Megan and the Weather Witch* is a fantasy book containing two stories using the same main characters. The stories are cleverly written and twist normal reality around in interesting ways, making readers question their everyday perceptions. The adventures are fast-moving and enjoyable. The only weakness with the story is in the dialogue, particularly the bats’ dialogue. The

important for absurd writing to work. Although this book has some excellent features, it leaves the reader ultimately dissatisfied.

Chislett’s *Melinda’s No’s Cold and Yellow* are also absurd, but both work better than Johnson’s book. Chislett plays with language to create a light but delightful tale in a story about two children who contract first a no’s cold and then the flu. Munsch also plays with language-related concepts in his absurd story of Brigid who colours herself from head to toe with

bats mean the reverse of all they say, emphasizing the reversal theme central to the stories. However, here Morgan is too heavy handed, and the bats' reversals are both obvious and silly. However, in this book, the pictures are stronger than the text. Krykorka's illustrations, which have drawn so much beauty from the Northern stories of Michael Kusugak, add an extra dimension of fantasy to the text which will thoroughly delight a child. She does not keep to a strictly realistic approach in her art. Krykorka's pictures are sometimes completely precise, while at other times they are vague, with blurry or shifting outlines, as suits the part of the story being illustrated. Also Krykorka's colours tend to be muted, with dark blues and greens predominant, certainly suitable for the nighttime setting, but also conducive to the atmosphere of mystery. Here the pictures definitely outshine the story.

All these books use heroines. The variety with which the heroines are presented here is heartening as it suggests that the stereotypical child heroine is disappearing from children's literature. The generally high calibre of art work in these books is also heartening. Lovers of both good art and good stories should be watching Canadian picture books very closely in the years to come.

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#### UNE OUVERTURE REMARQUABLE SUR LE MONDE DE L'AUTRE

**Mystères de Chine.** Chrystine Brouillet. Illus. Nathalie Gagnon. Montréal, La courte échelle, 1993 (Roman Jeunesse). 93pp., 7,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89021-189-4.

Ce roman nous plonge dans le monde familier de tous les jours: la grande ville où les jeunes se déplacent en autobus ou en métro, consultent les livres à la bibliothèque municipale et—les vacances terminées—sont bien obligés de revenir à l'école. C'est le monde d'Andréa-Maria, une jeune fille comme tant d'autres, qui déteste le brocoli et adore son chien, dont elle ramasse les crottes "même si [elle] n'aime pas ça" (p.51). Exceptionnellement, ce monde sera investi pendant quelques jours de légendes d'autrefois et de parfums venus de la lointaine Chine.

En effet, ce mélange du familier et de l'exotique, cette rencontre entre l'Ouest et l'Est, fait de *Mystères de Chine* un roman piquant. Andréa-Maria et son nouvel ami Arthur découvrent dans une grande boîte à thé une lettre en chinois et un négatif. C'est le point de départ d'un mystère que les amis tâcheront de résoudre avec l'aide de Xiao-Fen, camarade de classe d'Andréa-Maria. Quelle est la légende des Fils des Roseaux? Pourquoi la photographie de l'impératrice Mei se trouve-t-elle dans la boîte? Et que signifie la phrase énigmatique: "La forêt de sept monts cache des arbres noirs et les arbres cachent le trésor de la sorcière"? A vrai dire, les trois amis devront courir maints dangers avant de mener leur enquête à bonne fin.