

## OF GRANDMOTHERS, BOTANISTS AND A GRANDMOTHER-BOTANIST

G. JOAN MORRIS

*The Saturday Party*, Ann McKechnie. Illustrated by Ruth Bagshaw. Clarke Irwin, 1972. 57 pp. \$4.95 hardcover.

*The Unwanted Adventure of Harold Greenhouse*, M. G. Wilkins. Illustrated by Roy Condy. Scholastic-TAB, 1977. 72 pp. paper.

*The Peanut Plan*, Claire Watson Garcia. Illustrated by Claire Watson Garcia. Kids Can Press. 66 pp. \$3.50 paper.

How pleasant for a change to read three new Canadian-authored books for the eight-to-eleven set which are not directly concerned with Eskimos or Indians or Canadiana of some kind! There is a dearth of good Canadian books which are general in outlook.

*Saturday Party* fits the bill very nicely. There are some Canadian references: maple trees, elderberry bushes and so on, but they are incidental to the story. In this book, three children visit their grandmother every Saturday for tea and stories. The ceremony of the tea is most elegant:

The muffins gleamed with golden butter and steam wafted gently from the silver teapot. There were rolled sandwiches and tiny doughnuts piled in a pyramid and gingersnaps and a rich, dark, fruitcake.

Sounds delicious! It should make every child positively long for such a granny.

Not only does grandmother give delectable tea-parties, but she also tells wonderful stories, happily suited to each grandchild. The first (for Maggie) deals with the problems of a girl who is plain-looking. I especially liked the absolutely right ending of this tale.

The next story, a Chinese one, for Tim, has some rather fine descriptive writing:

The Emperor was very grand . . . and from the top of his head grew a thin black pigtail, like a stalk on a pale and beautiful pear.

There is a gentle, poetic, soothing quality to McKechnie's prose which enables you to savour the words, rather than just read them. For all that, the stories are engrossing and the action flows along smoothly. Mrs. McKechnie states that she

wants her stories — even the fantasies — to have a feeling of everyday reality. She has certainly accomplished this in *The Saturday Party*. She is working on another book, which may now have been published. I look forward to reading more of her work.

*The Unwanted Adventures of Harold Greenhouse* was so delightfully humorous and so well illustrated that it seems rather a pity this soft-cover book was not more sturdily bound. It is certain to be a favourite with children and in for many re-readings. But, how long will the glued binding hold up?

Harold Greenhouse (aptly named, since he's interested in botany) is kidnapped by two bunglers in place of his rich look-alike W. Duckworth III. Never losing his cool for a moment, Harold not only rescues both himself and his look-alike, but also turns the two kidnapers over to the police.

M. G. Wilkins plunges straight into the action; in fact, Harold is kidnapped before the first page is over. Yet the characters are well-drawn, especially Harold, "who after all, was a very unusual person." The vocabulary is challenging, presenting such words as "lachrymatory" and two hard-to-distinguish ones, "typographical" and "topographical". However, it is all in keeping with Howard's rather pedantic nature. Harold's love of reading enables him to figure his way out of several difficult situations. For example, since he has read a great deal about escape artists, he has no trouble freeing himself from the ropes his captors have bound him in. Also, his knowledge of botany enables him to deduce that he has been abducted to Venezuela.

His captors are infinitely stupid and Harold is easily able to outsmart them all the way. Children will delight in this aspect of the story. Harold is not only well-read, but also he thinks before he acts, and sets out to find the kidnapers in an organized manner. A most commendable hero.

Illustrations by Roy Condy are lively and colourful and are a perfect complement to the text. I particularly enjoyed the one on page 65 which depicts the intrepid Harold jabbing a hypodermic into his captor's rear end.

M. G. Wilkins has also written *I am a Duck* (Scholastic). I hope he will write more adventures about Harold.

*The Peanut Plan* by Claire Watson Garcia makes less easy reading. This book, by the author of *Harriet and the Great Bike Robbery*, is 59 pages long, but the story line is rather slight and would have been better told in 29 pages. Amelia Squirrel plants a peanut garden around the base of her grandmother's tree home to ensure a supply of food for the winter, since once before she had had to bring her grandmother food during a severe winter storm.

Why she is so devoted to her grandmother is hard to understand, since grandma (another pedantic botanist but of a far different order from warm, lik-

eable Harold Greenhouse) seems crotchety and disagreeable. Our first description of grandma is of "an old face with glaring black eyes" peering suspiciously out the door. Amelia greets her politely and asks how she is.

"No better than usual," replied grandma, . . . twitching her tail impatiently. "Well, come on in if you're coming. And close the door behind you!"

Not exactly a joyous welcome, and very different indeed from the one extended by grandmother Green in *The Saturday Party*. This grandmother is forever complaining and recalling "the good old days". She compares squirrels who have lost respect for plant life to people who cut down trees to widen roads for their foul cars. This ecological moralizing is much too obvious.

In addition, the author's recurrent use of Latin phrases and songs is an anomaly in a book which presents the juvenile idea that the sun has to be sung to each morning to help it get up and going on its day. The two simply do not go together.

Many things in this wordy, rambling story were confusing or not fully explained. When grandma is talking to Amelia and her parents about the tradition of squirrels playing a part in community life, grandma says (as though Amelia's mother were not present), "Your mother chose another way, much to my sorrow." One wonders just what that dreadful "other way" was: raising little squirrels, or what?

Again, when grandma ventures out to see what changes spring has wrought, she comments drearily, "Such a lovely sight! And one I can't expect to see again, I'm afraid." Such a depressing statement, and one we are not prepared for: we know she is old, but surely not that old! And, although she says that she is sick, we are given no details of her illness.

On the positive side, the People's Peanut Plan itself and the peanut butter recipes at the back of the book are excellent and should appeal to children. And a ten-year-old I know was very taken with the little poem about spring. The realistic pen and ink sketches in *The Peanut Plan* are especially well done, but the text simply does not come up to their level.

One final comment: there is a rather nice touch on the front cover of *The Saturday Party*; a tiny maple leaf with a happy face, and above it the notation, "A Canadian Children's Book". This logo might be more widely used: it should help parents, librarians, and others who are looking for Canadian literature for children.

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*G. Joan Morris is a part-time teacher-librarian at Coronation Public School in Brantford. She has written stories for Magook and Gage Publishing.*