

## SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN PICTURE BOOKS

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*The Dog Power Tower*, Beverley Allinson, Judith Lawrence, Barbara O'Kelly. Illus. by Alan Daniel. Methuen Publications, 1977. 32 pp. \$3.95 paper, \$5.95 cloth.

*Marie & Gwen, You're Late Again*, Birgit Ohms. Scholastic-TAB publications Ltd., 1976. 44 pp. paper.

Two new picture books have recently been published in Canada. One is written in part by a fairly well-known writer in the area of Canadian children's books: one is written by a new-comer. One is a full-color, super deluxe spin-off from a television program; the other is a quiet little book, illustrated in black and white. One has an action-packed story full of villains and adventure and heroics; the other is a somewhat unrealistic story about two little girls. One has all the literature-class ingredients of a good picture book for children; the other seems to have been written by a doting Mom. Neither book will set the Canadian picture book world on fire, but, oddly, it's the action-packed, color extravaganza with the well-known author that's a wash-out, and the black-and-white tale by the new-comer that shows some spark.

The flashy book, *The Dog Power Tower*, is based on the television show "Mr. Dressup". (It comes across as Canada's answer to the mish-mash that's come on the market from the "Sesame Street" show.) The book is put together by four contributors: Beverley Allinson, Barbara O'Kelly, Judith Lawrence, and Alan Daniel. Probably the best known of these is Beverley Allinson who has spent ten years as a full-time writer for children in Canada. Her publications have included a language arts series *Kids Like Us*, several ancillary reading series, including the series *Women at Work*, and two trade books. Barbara O'Kelly was co-author of *Kids Like Us* and earlier produced a record based on "Mr. Dressup." Judith Lawrence, the puppeteer and co-star on "Mr. Dressup," has written and edited several educational series. Alan Daniel is a well-known book designer and illustrator.

The second book, *Marie & Gwen, You're Late Again*, is written by a new-comer to both writing and to Canada. Birgit Ohms spent her early life in Sweden, then lived in Germany and the United States before moving to Toronto in 1976. She is by training a commercial artist, having studied at the art college in Stockholm and the German Master School for Fashion in Munich. Her reason, she says, for trying writing: "Although I'm primarily an artist, I've always enjoyed writing about the things and people in which I am interested and then drawing pictures to go along with what I have written."

The pictures in the *Dog Power Tower* range from pleasing to awful to bewildering. Yet the illustrations are, on the whole, the best part of the book: they follow the text (none of the frustration of reading one thing and looking at something else), show lots of imagination without over-doing it and smothering the child's own imagination, and they are done in exciting, bright colors. The book uses the technique of moving from an actual photograph of the real television program, through a combination of photograph and painting (which shows Casey and Finnegan climbing from the television to the world of Amelia and the airplane), to a pure painting. Presumably this helps us take the leap into fantasy. Fans of the television show will be disappointed to see how little Finnegan and Casey in the story resemble the original puppets. Somehow it seems the whole book would have been improved without the intrusion of the "real" television program into the fantasy. There is also a most bewildering illustration which shows a group of Very Important People who are unmistakably caricatures of contemporary political figures (Pierre Trudeau with a pig in tow, Jimmy Carter with his teeth). The significance to the story is illusory, and the cartoon obviously dates the book. Perhaps Daniels was simply bored.

It's obvious that Birgit Ohms' strength lies in her art work. Her pictures are all simple, black and white drawings, each done in the shape of a cameo. The only color is the pinky-mauve surrounding each oval and the color on the cover. Though her characters narrowly miss being of the "Love Is" cutesy variety, she manages to capture the subtle peculiarities of huggable real little girls (see Figure 1).

The story of the *Dog Power Tower* is a marshmallow version of Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang*. Two youngsters and their dogs set off on a homemade aircraft. On a brief landing, the two dogs are lured away to a dreadful tower where dogs are used for generating electrical power. The children and a couple of other animals come to their rescue and the evil operation is put to an end. The plot-line is frustrating: the airplane offers potential for an exciting adventure but eventually becomes a meaningless extra. The dog story might have been equally exciting, but we don't get a chance to build up any affection for dogs who at first seem like unimportant baggage. There's no sense of suspense: the rescue mission is pulled off with absolutely no hitches. How boring!

Similarly, *Marie & Gwen* has an excellent basic idea: the children are always late, always make up an excuse, and are always being scolded. It's a theme to which many children can easily relate. But then it slides: the children make amends by knitting a scarf for their father. The story ends with an exchange of gifts: the girls receive a cat named Tick-Tock who then becomes their excuse for being late. The story comes close to being good, but misses for the reason the girls' excuses miss: it's just not quite close enough to the truth. A more interesting and realistic activity would have been to *try* knitting a scarf with Mama's "new wool" as a surprise *only* to find they'd made a mess instead of a scarf.

It's obvious that the writers of the *Dog Power Tower* are all students of literature and know what ought to be included in a story to make it good "kiddies' lit." They make that conscious leap from the real to the imaginary; they include big words like "itinerary" and "unassailable" they tastefully include food ("Aunt Bird produced jelly donuts, cherry cheesecake, buttered scones, and chocolate mousse"); they make things happen in threes: three steps to the rescue, three people visited in the search for the dogs, three types of VIP (visiting dignitaries, eminent scientists, and government officials). It has all the vital ingredients, but just doesn't mix into a successful story.

On the other hand, *Marie & Gwen* reads like a mother's story about her own children (which it is). The sentences are short and choppy, with no particular concern for what must and must not be included. Ohms' writing has a naive child-like quality, and an unselfconscious enthusiasm for her young characters.

Although the book by Allinson has all the light bulbs needed to outshine the little book by Ohms, it won't, because its possibilities were just never plugged in. One might say that the power of the *Dog Power Tower* just went to the dogs, but in *Marie & Gwen* it's "cat" ching on.

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