

### More Reviews (from New Brunswick) that Make Good Reading

*Rise and Shine*. Raffi, Bonnie Simpson and Bert Simpson. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Random House, 1996. Unpag. \$20.00 cloth. ISBN 0-679-30819-9. *Back to the Cabin*. Ann Blades. Orca, 1996. Unpag. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-051-7. *The Patchwork House*. Sally Fitz-Gibbon. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Orca, 1996. Unpag. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-090-8. *Foster Baby*. Rhian Brynjolson. Pemmican. Unpag. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-921827-54-7. *Grandpa's Visit*. Richardo Keens-Douglas. Illus. Frances Clancy. Annick, 1996. Unpag. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-488-5; *Stephanie's Ponytail*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick, 1996. Unpag. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-550357-484-2. *Albert's Old Shoes*. Stephen Muir. Illus. Mary Jane Muir. Stoddart Kids, 1996. 32 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5777-5. *Yancy & Bear*. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick, 1996. Unpag. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-502-4; *Boy Soup or When Giant Caught Cold*. Loris Lesynski. Illus. author. Annick, 1996. Unpag. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-416-8.

For the second time, students in my "Access to Literacies" class at the University of New Brunswick have collaborated with the editors of *Canadian Children's Literature* to produce "Reviews Worth Reading." The first set of reviews (CCL Spring 1997) were so good, we decided to try the exercise again. The benefits are mutual. Readers of CCL gain access to reviews which have been well-researched and developed in the context of attention to contemporary critical discourses. The students are able to engage in school work with real-life applications.

The people I teach are training to be teachers. Since they are charged with the responsibility of making people literate, their abilities to articulate critical responses to texts, to make value judgements, are extremely important for the literacy education of our children.

When, as a class, we looked at the books, we were able to categorize them into definable genres. The first group bears an uneasy relationship to travel brochures, with a "see Canada (especially British Columbia) first" caption all but printed on the covers. Included in this group are: *Back to the Cabin*, *Rise and Shine*, and *The Patchwork House*. After these home stories come family stories for the multicultural market: *Foster Baby* and *Grandpa's Visit*. The third group is on fashion trends (*Stephanie's Ponytail* and *Albert's Old Shoes*), while the fourth group is on the contemporary fantasy lives of young children (*Yancy & Bear* and *Boy Soup*). I write around the reviews — and introduce the students.

#### Travel Brochures

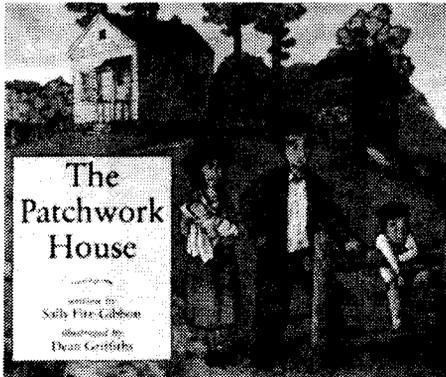
Although *Rise and Shine* didn't receive government support, the message of upbeat multiculturalism is very much in evidence, as the review by Tanya Moules, Andrea Martin, Melanie Ryan and Calvin Chaisson demonstrates. They recognized the "feel good" focus of the story:

'Rise with the bluebird, / Shine like the sun. / Now's the time to rise and shine.' Come and sing along with Raffi, one of North America's most successful recording artists, on an upbeat swing across Canada. Give *Rise and Shine* to beginning readers and they will be able to read it back to you in no time. With the help of Eugenie Fernandes's illustrations, painted in sunny colours, readers will be taken on a journey by the bluebird of happiness. They will be touched by many different cultures and landscapes and accompanied by other animal tour guides: from the puffins in the east, to the huskies in the north, from the wheat fields of the prairies, to the bears and rams in the west.

Cultural diversity, from Ukrainians in the west to Inuit in the north, is very much in evidence.

The next two books in this see-Canada-first series were funded in part by the government of British Columbia. The students in my class, all trained to attend to the peritext, were quick to notice that the British Columbia Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture had a hand in the development of *Back to the Cabin* and *The Patchwork House*. Both books are good on landscape and on evocations of family life. *Back to the Cabin* (I'll write about this one) plays on the difference between "fun" in the city and fun in the country. The students also noticed that it looks like it is the story of a single mother and her children: no daddy is in evidence.

Sonya Langille, Scott Macklin and Corinna Marquardt, in their review of *The Patchwork House*, focus on the culturally specific imprints families stamped onto the house which grounds the story:



'Right beside the garden gate they planted a cherry tree.' That tree grows throughout the pages of the book marking the passage of time. Just as storms uproot trees, so may outside forces uproot a family. This book, which is supported by the British Columbia government, marks the coming and going of culturally diverse families who live in the 'Patchwork House.' Yet, as each

family adds a personal patch to the patchwork of the house there remains one constant sentiment: 'This is the place for us.'

The warm tone watercolours by Dean Griffiths remind readers of the comforts of home. The translucent illustrations are like old photographs stored in a box capturing memories of days long gone. The text acts almost as a series of captions for the full page pictures that commemorate the evolving family. *The Patchwork House* is an invitation to discover why families love to call British Columbia home.

### *Family Stories for the Multicultural Market*

As you will see, *Foster Baby* (reviewed by Alison Caldwell and Maxine McConnell), is the worst book in the bunch. Here's why:

This is not a book. It is a manual, a pathetic attempt to introduce the concept of foster families to young readers. The story is insulting to First Nations people because it portrays them as 'dirty' — and implies that foster children come from households plagued by drug and alcohol abuse. The publication presents its topic in a patronizing and condescending manner. It implies that people are stupid or do not possess the intellectual ability to handle the straight facts on foster care.

Why would Rhian Brynjolson jeopardize her reputation as a respected illustrator by creating something so embarrassing? The Manitoba Arts Council and The Canada Council should be ashamed to be associated in any way, with this publication.

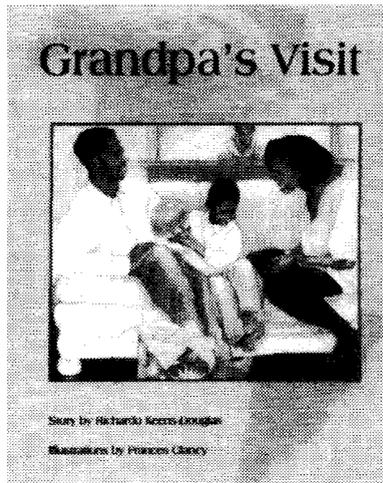
The students hated the book. I think they've learned to be wary of didactic diatribes dressed up to look like picture books.

The other book exploring family dynamics, *Grandpa's Visit*, avoids such pitfalls, because it is written by a "real" storyteller, Richardo Keens-Douglas. Here is the review by Jennifer Higgins and Craig Pitts:

'Then one evening, out of the blue, the doorbell rang and standing in the middle of the entrance was Jeremy's grandfather, with the biggest smile you have ever seen and a missing front tooth.'

The unannounced visit from Grandpa was not something Jeremy's parents planned, but it turned out to be just what the family needed. Before Grandpa's visit, Jeremy's Mom and Dad were busy with two jobs. The house was equipped with all the latest appliances and electronics. Mom and Dad did not even notice that Jeremy's two best friends were Tellie, the TV and Victor, the VCR. It took Grandpa's visit, a simple toy ball, and a power outage to show that spending time together with people we love is more important than spending time and money on material things. Richardo Keens-Douglas, in his funny and lyrical text, captures this middle class family's change in attitude.

Keens-Douglas celebrates his Caribbean-Canadian heritage here as he does in his other works, , *The Nutmeg Princess* and *La Diabesse and the Baby*. Frances Clancy's realistic pencil crayons on gesso illustrations heighten the cultural



connections. African masks hang on the living room wall and Grandpa's gift of a toy ball is in the tricolour green, yellow and red.

The lesson is clear: family values are more important than keeping up with the neighbours. Yet being cool and "like" your friends is a fundamental part of childhood.

### *Fashion Trends*

Any new book by Robert Munsch deserves a mention. His perfectly observed renderings of the lives of North American children in the late twentieth-century are always worth noting. Here Donna Retson, Alva-Lee Patterson, Scott Tingley and Susan Somerville comment:

Who gets the last laugh after a bunch of 'brainless copycats' take advantage of Stephanie's ingenuity? Robert Munsch explores the world of childhood politics and manners in *Stephanie's Ponytail*, as he has in other books in the same genre, *Thomas's Snowsuit* and *I Have to Go*. In *Stephanie's Ponytail*, Munsch turns the game of follow-the-leader into a warning example about the dangers of conforming to peer pressure: today's foolish trend of broccoli ponytails 'sprouts' into tomorrow's fad. Munsch uses the single joke to motivate the page turning as readers seek to discover what new style the 'hair-oine' will come up with next.

*Albert's Old Shoes* is another fashion statement story. Maggie Kelley, Mary Jane Muir and Wendy Meldrum explain the moral.

This is an 'Ugly Duckling' story. Albert is a lonely and misunderstood little pig. His old shoes seem to be holding him back, pinching his ability to fit in. His schoolmates are always two steps ahead while his mother is always two

steps behind. However his old shoes become a new trend because of an outburst of frustration. Eventually, all the pigs realize that even followers can be trend setters.

Throughout the book Albert is portrayed off to the side. The text mirrors this separation until the end when Albert joins his peers.

### *Contemporary Fantasy for Young Children*

Another follow-the-leader story, *Boy Soup*, written and illustrated by Loris Lesynski. Cheryl Craib, Leigh-Ann Mabie, Christine Nelson and Jennifer Pollack are on the trail here of another warning example, this time turning traditional tales to the service of changed contemporary sensibilities.

'A sweet boy, a neat boy, a boy so delicious — A giant might find himself licking the dishes.' In the tradition of 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' Loris Lesynski turns the threat of tragedy into comic celebration. What harm could come to a cartoon-character who speaks in rhyming verse? Follow Kate and her friends on an adventure of trickery and teamwork. In this modern feminist Jack tale, Kate takes the lead. The joke is on the giant as Kate discovers the power of words. She doctors the boy soup in order to 'save all her friends from this hideous fate.' With help from her friends, the old recipe is erased, and the heroine creates something new.

And finally, not a follow-the-leader story, really, but another kind of mimicking, one that plays out a me-and-my-shadow relationship between a boy and his bear. Here Kelly Terris, Erma Brian, Denise Stymiest, Kim Allen and Doreen Parker review *Yancy and Bear*.

'My you're cute and curly this morning!' When Yancy comes to breakfast dressed in Bear's sailor suit, and Bear shows up at the table in Yancy's sleeper is it only the reader who knows there is something different about them? This tale of role reversal is based on Hutchins's own childhood memories.

What a way for a Bear to spend his birthday, turning thirty-three thousand somersaults! No wonder he looked like someone who 'crammed a whole year of living into just one day.'

Ruth Ohl's playful illustrations make it possible for even nonreaders to engage in the story. The young reader can identify with this story because it explores adult roles through play, while parents will enjoy the opportunity to reminisce about their own childhoods.

In writing these reviews, students learned to articulate value judgments. They demonstrate to themselves that they recognize a "good" book when they see one, and that they also know how to talk about it.

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