Illustrated children's books as art: The art of the lobster quadrille

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Résumé: *Dans un effort pour sortir la littérature pour la jeunesse de la morale et du didactisme, Jestke Sybesma évoque la complexité du travail d'écriture et d'édition du livre illustré. Son article fait d'abord référence aux Editions Tundra et à leur directrice, May Cutler. Ensuite, une analyse d'albums de Dayal Khalsa, Warabe Aska et Gilles Tibo nous est proposée. Sybesma conclut que le travail des illustrations dans ces oeuvres est souvent subversif.*

The *Nation*, a weekly publication committed to reviewing children's books on a regular basis, was in 1866 the only North American periodical which discussed the Appleton edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. The detailed review, dwelling on the humour, characterization, twists of plot and parodies of popular song in the book, lauded Carroll's gift for wit. The quotation of several puns, such as the one about the school master who was an old Turtle – "we called him Tortoise because he taught us" – made it clear to the adult readers of the *Nation* that the purpose of this book was quite unusual. Its merit was audacious: an appeal to children, written for their pleasure and enjoyment. Without reservations, the book was warmly received by the reviewer. In comparison with the lengthy evaluation of the text, the closing paragraphs concerning the illustrations of Alice fared but poorly:

> This is one of the best children's books we ever met with – a delightful addition to a delightful branch of literature. The illustrations also are excellent, for Mr. Tenniel always excels in such things. His pictures of animated cards and his portraits of the Mock Turtle, the Hatter, the Duchess, and the Cheshire Cat are immensely funny. The drawings are full of spirit and expressions, and very elegant in design.[1]

The poor quality of the printing certainly affected the illustrations, but this did not deter the reviewer from singling out the elegance of the drawings. Contrary to the extensive discussion of the text, there is no analysis of how Tenniel's drawings realize the characters. The absence of even a modest discourse about why these images appear so "immensely funny" suggests that the reviewer, although well-versed in textual analyses, does not seem to know how to "read" pictures.

Subsequent reviews of children's books in the *Nation* referred frequently to *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, using it almost as a touchstone for excel-

lence. Apparently, the reviewer of *Alice*, in all innocence, staked out the common ground for future reviews; after digging into the text, one could rake lightly over the illustrations.

In comparison with their American colleagues, Canadian reviewers of children's literature traditionally were more influenced by English models. However, it is fair to say that there are common characteristics for children's books published in North America. In this context, Rev. Samuel Osgood's article of 1865 in the *Atlantic Monthly* is pioneering because it stresses that a moral factor combined with play is essential to books for children.[2] Osgood's comments about quality in children's literature planted the seeds for generations of North American writers and reviewers:

> In claiming thus for our children's book this embodiment of wholesome truth in beautiful forms, we are not favoring any feeble dilettanteism, or sacrificing practical strength to pleasant fancy. Nay, quite contrary; for it is certain that truth has power, especially with the young, only when it is so embodied as to show itself in the life, and to speak and act for itself. We believe in dynamic reading for children; and we now make a distinct and decided point of this, quite positive, as we are, that books are a curse if they merely excite the sensibilities and stimulate the brain, and bring on sedentary languor, and do not stir the muscles, and quicken the will, and set the hand and foot to work and play under the promptings of a cheerful heart.[3]

Osgood's thoughtful admonitions herald, already in 1865, the two ingredients which will flourish in North American children's books: humour and a moral message.

The keen eyes of the Reverend recognized also the didactic virtues of images which could teach children

> . . .to appreciate natural form, feature, and color, and composition, and so possess third senses and fancy with materials and impressions of loveliness, that, when the constructive reason or the ideal imagination begins to work, it will work wisely and well.[4]

He suggests thus that the descriptive aspects of illustrations are educational tools which can contribute to teaching the child judgement. Naturally, these formal features are used in creating an attractive visual representation which stimulates, in turn, the imagination of the young reader. "Uglification" certainly was not in the cards!

So ingrained became the ideas reflected in this pioneering advice from Osgood that they perpetuated (in reviews) until well into the 20th century these unquestioned assumptions about "lovely" illustrations in children's literature. Vague descriptions of pretty pictures and sentimental images to advocate the book for popular consumption became the common denominator for poorly-reviewed illustrations in children's books.

At last, almost a century after Osgood published his seminal standard for children's literature, Sheila Egoff, in *The republic of childhood*, looked into

the overgrown garden of traditional criticism. She shakes reviewers up with her lament about the deplorable quality of illustrated children's books:

> It is in no way surprising that the best produced and best illustrated Canadian children's books have not yet matched the best from European countries, but that the whole level should until recently have been so low shows a lack of imagination and sensitivity in production editors and publishers and a lack of understanding of the value of good art work for children.[5]

It is also at this point that, after all these years of neglect, May Cutler, the pioneering publisher of Tundra Books, decided to pull thorns and thistles in the Canadian illustrated children's book trade. When she founded Tundra Books in 1967, she realized that publishing children's books is as difficult as learning to dance the quadrille. In the initial stages of her enterprise, a cavalier bookseller, who knew the Canadian market like the back of his hand, informed her about the expectations of the average Canadian buyer:

> I tell you how to make money at it. . .Publish books of Indian or Eskimo legends, all the librarians feel they have to buy them. And every fall, publish a hockey book. All the parents buy these for their kids.[6]

Such tangles of conventions guiding adults in selecting illustrated children's books did not deter May Cutler from publishing quality books for children. Entering the publishing trade is like dancing the quadrille: there are many steps, side steps and mis-steps. Apparently, the founder of Tundra Books did have a special tune in her mind in order to participate in the quadrille. She defined Tundra's concept of "a children's book as art" as follows:

> The main emphasis here is that the BOOK AS A WHOLE is a work of art, and its individual components must all serve, and be subservient to, that end – just as in painting, it is not how good one part of it is, but the effect of the whole that counts.[7]

Over the years, the distinguishing characteristic of Tundra Books has become their slogan "Children's books as works of art". The original intention of the publisher, to provide quality children's books for the Canadian market, did succeed against all odds. Tundra's standards of excellence can be recognized as an inspiration for Canadian publishers who have followed suit. Today, Canadian illustrated children's books have been selected for distinguished recognitions and awards, both at home and abroad. The voice of reviewers, concentrating on such award-winning illustrations, however, has remained a "timid and tremulous sound".[8] To remedy this hesitant dilemma in the minds of future reviewers, this discussion about the art of illustrating children's books will look at Tundra's publications in order to show that there is a purpose in understanding the sequence of steps when dancing the quadrille.

Publishing children's literature is not a solo effort. It takes more than one person to dance the quadrille. A combination of four dancers, for instance, is comprised of the publisher, who leads, and three other partners, for instance, the author, the artist and the book designer. Conditions of the book trade recognize that the publisher, as an institution, does exercise a specific amount of control about what gets published and why. According to May Cutler of Tundra Books:

> The standard should be the application of originality and sensitivity, imagination and inventiveness, wit and taletelling and potentiality for permanence. Humanity is, of course, integral.[9]

The commercial relationship between the publisher, the author and the artist illustrating the text is within the control of the publisher. In this context, the economic return for the author or the artist certainly are factors affecting time and effort invested in writing or illustrating the book. For instance, when the artist does not write the text, will the honorarium for the illustrations actually cover the time and materials invested in producing the art work? An experienced artist usually works quite efficiently, but an inexperienced illustrator, most likely, faces many trials and errors before completing the job. In addition, honoraria received from illustrations are usually marginal when compared with sales of art through commercial galleries. The moment an illustrator becomes recognized as an artist, then the art gallery opens its doors to exhibit the work. If the art sells, this usually becomes a more lucrative avenue for the illustrator. However, once the gallery snaps the artist up, this person, as an illustrator, usually is out of reach for the publisher.

It might be argued that the value of the skills of a recognized artist places a prohibitive burden on the budget allocated to publish a specific book. As a result, Tundra Books, like other publishers, often seems forced to search for unestablished artists or lay-illustrators. Look, for instance, at *Canadian childhoods*; an anthology selected from over two decades of Tundra publications, it includes seventeen illustrated stories. Most of the seventeen illustrators are self-taught. According to May Cutler, "children don't care that the horse's legs are not right; after all their own drawing is no better, but they do care about the motion and humanity and beauty that is there".[11] This opinion is indeed reflected in the majority of the illustrations selected for this Tundra anthology. With the exception of Kurelek, the masthead of the book, and a few other artists, most of these illustrators draw or paint in a naive or quasi-naive style. A preference for this style was expressed clearly by Tundra's founding president, who stated in 1978, that "I think the naive painter is the most potentially exciting – and most ignored – illustrator of children's books".[12] To begin with, Richard Pelham and Lena Newman's images in *Canadian childhoods* are distinctly amateurish. The prescriptive naive style is clearly evident in the work of Miyuki Tanobe and Allan Moak who both attempt to imitiate children's

paintings. Another example is Guy Baily who works in a style resembling folk art.[13] The combination of this mélange of widely assorted and unrelated pictures presents the reader of *Canadian childhoods* with an interesting theme and a pot pourri of artistic expressions. The book does suffer from the uneven ability of the artists. A different sense of imbalance is evident on those pages where the illustration runs over the margin to the left or right edge of the paper. Here, the densely-patterned image, which tends to be heavily loaded with strong colours, overpowers the three or four lines of text underneath the picture. This contemporary method of designing the lay-out of the page seems less suitable when a large area of bold colour is combined with only a narrow strip of white which carries a bit of text.

One often forgets that the packaging of the book by means of visual communication design is an important factor affecting the visual appeal of the publication. The designer, determining the size and quality of the paper, the lay-out of the text and the typeface used, is a crucial partner in the making of a "children's book as a work of art". The public's immediate perception of an excellent publication is closely tied to the physical presentation of the book. In fact, the illustrator, the author and the designer are so closely integrated that, ideally, like the dancer and the dance of the quadrille, they are one. The anthology, *Canadian childhoods*, as a whole certainly will have a nostalgic appeal for the Canadian public. The multicultural experiences narrated in the text reflect common experiences of different strata of the population. The book will touch many Canadians, precisely because this variety of human experiences is an integral part of our culture.

Forgetting for a moment the idea of "Canadian" illustrations, it is possible to pay some additional attention to the recognition of the value of the illustrator's skill. It is commonly assumed that a child might seem to get as much pleasure from illustrations made by lay-artists as from those by trained artists. The innocence of lay-artists may be appealing because of their bold use of colour or their unusual sensitivity.[14] However, when we take a closer look at the difference between an untrained artist and a trained one, then the visual lexicon of a trained artist tends to be considerably more sophisticated in comparison with the look of images made by a naive illustrator. Essentially, a lay-artist can make a broad-based commercially acceptable look, but such an artist tends to be concerned with "legibility" of the image, a quality of a simple illustration of the text, rather than "readability" which challenges the pleasure, imagination and general interest in looking, "reading", the image.

No doubt, to find a lay-artist who produces an attractive image is commercially viable. It promotes the false illusion that children don't recognize the difference anyway. However, it might be anticipated that sincere efforts to raise even further the quality of illustrated Canadian children's books must recognize that there is little logic in using an unskilled artist to provide images which are mixed in conventions. Superficially, art for the average Canadian

child may seem expendable. But, clearly, if one believes that illustrated children's books are an important vehicle to promote visual literacy, one must admit that there is no such thing as a good illustration without training. Likewise, it would be fruitless to argue that good writing does not require practice.

The illustration as the "production" of the artist leads one to the vagaries of perception of skill. Essentially, according to Webster's, to illustrate is to enlighten intellectually, culturally or spiritually. The paucity of aesthetic issues that are raised about the illustrations in children's books implies that an adult audience, including reviewers, is at a loss when verbalizing the discriminating process which takes place in one's mind while looking at visual art. Often literary critics who are well versed in interpretive criticism of the text resort to superficial descriptions of what they see when it comes to analyzing the illustrations. May Cutler's own response, as an editor and publisher, "we like it or we don't. It's a bore having to explain the reasons", reinforces this point.[15] Her experience taught her that:

> The children's book as art usually must first be appreciated by adults. It tends to be expensive and needs an appreciative, experienced eye, at least initially.[16]

It is true that the adult's response, whether that of the publisher, reviewer or purchaser, is a subjective response based upon individual taste. It is also true that adults, when selecting illustrated children's books, tend not to refer to some intellectual or bookish aesthetics, but to the everyday feelings, the lived experience. From this perspective, the visual appeal of an illustrated children's book lies in the viewer's visual literacy, that vague but essential skill which enhances a response to images as well as to book design.

The view that adults are responding objectively to an illustrated book for children ignores the fact that the average buyer selecting an attractive book for "younger" people frequently imposes on the book a need to find a nostalgic identity in the illustrations. This factor is confused with an objective decision whether or not the illustrated book has a pedagogical or aesthetic value deemed suitable for the child. The "uninformed" adult, when selecting an illustrated children's book, tends to pay more attention to *what* the images depict rather than *how* they are depicted.

What is at issue here is that in the production of illustrations for children's books, the images can carry multiple layers of meaning. The aesthetic reception and response to these illustrations should look beyond the formal presentation of the image by considering shared beliefs and cultural conventions which make us accept "suspensive discourse" rather than resolve available meanings.[17] We may conclude that the value of criticism directed at illustrated children's books is not so much in making decisions about good or bad illustrations, as it is in developing a discourse which covers a reading of meaning which can humanize our imagination. This line of argument could lead us to a more in-depth interpretation of illustrations in children's books.

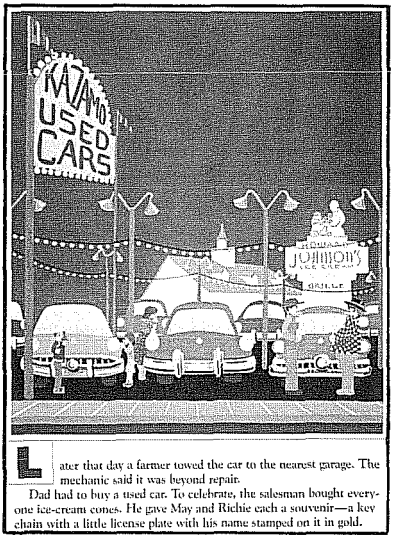
Since, however, the limitations of this discussion necessitate that we outline several "readings" of illustrated children's books, we will concentrate on a selection of books published by Tundra. This small example does not in any way answer the complex issues which can be raised in the context of children's literature criticism. The selection of only a sampling from Tundra's publications is because their interpretation of the quadrille is applicable to other Canadian publishers. Our reading of these illustrations attempts to reveal aspects of signification that usually remain hidden. The average viewer can be compared to the King in *Alice*, who said "if there's no meaning in it . . . that saves a world of trouble . . . and we needn't try to find any." The privileged reader, after responding to the images, might say, like the King after he gained insight into the matter, "I seem to see some meaning in them, after all".[18]

Let us begin with "reading" the images in Dayal Khalsa's *My family vacation* (Tundra, 1988). Looking at this travelogue as a representative though deliberately one-sided selection from contemporary life, a recurrent pattern emerges.[19] The text and illustrations celebrate the average speech and the common experience of a North American family travelling the highway down to Florida. A celebration of vernacular speech and kitch can be a treasure trove of fun, especially when one is led down the garden path to see clichés resurrected!

At first glance, the lively colours of *My family vacation* catch the eye. The drawing and pattern of colour areas emphasize flat, simple shapes which are decorative and easy to read. But on one's trip through this book, one does not need to be driving down a blind alley to see things in their true colours. The text is a string of clichéd phrases spoken by mom, dad and the kids: "where are we?" "right smack in the middle of nowhere," "I can't wait to get to the hotel so they'll have other children to play with." This vernacular text is, unfortunately, flogged with middle-brow seriousness, so that these clichés tend to remain dead.

The device of a family trip is a well-known theme in children's literature. But one wonders how much informational value this rather ordinary family vacation has for the average armchair traveller. One thinks, for instance, of the popular, early 19th century *Tarry-at-home travellers* series by the Rev. Isaac Taylor, which consisted of straightforward narratives and factual illustrations of interesting places.[20] The rather common and familiar scenes in *My family vacation* do have informational value, both in text and illustrations. They do emphasize that the Texaco stations, the Howard Johnson's, the motels and swimming pools, the bowling alleys and souvenir shops have a familiar face. The illustrations in the book promote the idea, that, apart from the palm trees and the parrot jungle, there are not many different "rues" in North American culture.

It is well known that a long car drive tends to be boring both for adults and children. The illustration at the beginning of *My family vacation* shows the



later that day a farmer towed the car to the nearest garage. The mechanic said it was beyond repair.

Dad had to buy a used car. To celebrate, the salesman bought everyone ice-cream cones. He gave May and Richie each a souvenir—a key chain with a little license plate with his name stamped on it in gold.

Fig. 1

stop at the (dated) Texaco station. The overly large sign in the foreground announces the presence of a restroom, suggesting the kids' imminent need although they have just started on the trip.

Another page shows the family caught in the rain on a country road to Florida. Some "darn cows" look with curious surprise at them and their car which has broken down. The adjacent illustration of the visit to the used car lot is one which rises above the reportorial tendency so typical of many pictures in this book (see figure 1). The used car salesman in his hat and checkered jacket is dressed like a clown. Behind rows of brightly-coloured cars on the lot, the familiar gable of Howard Johnson's, complete with a large sign advertising twenty-eight flavours of ice cream, is a deliberate pun. This juxtaposition suggests that buying used cars is like buying ice cream cones – they don't last. The sign advertising ice cream is placed immediately behind dad and the salesman, so that the word "grille" on this sign can be read directly above their heads. Adults know that one can be "burned" in buying a used car. In the illustration, everyone in the family is licking his or her cone. Dad holds a pink cone while the salesman has a yellow one, clearly a lemon flavor. It is quite obvious that they don't buy a lemon, although it is difficult to determine if their newly-acquired pink car, which they drive on the freeway to Florida, is a pink cadillac.[21] Finally, on the last night of their vacation, the whole family, including the children, go dancing at a nightclub. This "El Flamingo" must be a special club because, normally, minors are not encouraged to frequent such places, even if they drink only pineapple juice.

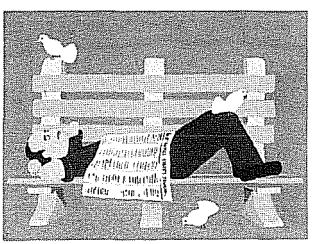
A critical reading of *My family vacation* indicates that the majority of the illustrations remain on a level of factual description. The images are presented in simple forms and decorative colours which have an "instant" attraction. The flaws of both the text and the illustrations lie in the lack of humour suited for children between (approximately) four and nine years old. The concept of publishing a book about our vernacular culture is fine, but like the clichés, this idea can be deadening when it is not fully resolved by a writer or illustrator who is not aware of the use of post-modern irony in deconstructing clichés.

The second book by Dayal Khalsa, also published in 1988, is the small but delightful *Sleepers*. In the illustrations for this book the author-artist seems

much more conscious of the play of signs and signifiers which is woven into the pictorial details. For instance, on the first page, father is shown sleeping on the soft couch, while on the second page mother hangs in a hammock between the weeping willows. At first sight, an adult might think, aha!, the old gender roles again. However, for children between two and five years of age, the hammock reminds them (subconsciously) of the gentle rocking womb. This pleasant association with mother is more relevant for a child than the unpleasant association of "hanging" between weeping willows.

It is quite evident that gender differences are subtly indicated in this booklet. The representation of the sleeping bodies of the immediate family members and of strangers clearly implies the conventional taboos. Mother's body in the hammock is not covered with a blanket and is thus visually accessible for the reader. Father's body on the couch, however, is covered with a green blanket which "neutralizes" all body parts below the armpits. Seen in a context of sexual taboos, the body of uncle Teddy, on page three, who sleeps in the bathtub, presents a challenge. His head and nude shoulders emerge above the edge of the tub, while an exposed (phallic) knee likewise is in view. The flat white *gestalt* of the tub, indeed, represents the typical colours of tubs; however, in association with uncle sleeping in the tub, the white seems to allude also to a *terra incognita*, the taboo of close inter-family relationships.

The pictorial metaphor of sexual taboos is again shown on page six, in the illustration of a man, covered with a newspaper, who sleeps on a bench in the park (see figure 2). Only the name of the paper is legible: the *Wall Street journal*. An adult can read this paper, but its contents are of no interest to children. This paper, covering the stomach and private parts of the stranger, alludes to the warning all parents give their children: "don't talk to strangers." The text indicates that the child knows this man, and the white doves, surrounding him, traditionally symbolize innocence and peace. He is, therefore, not shown as a threat. However, an adult, reading the book to a child, understands the danger of innocent children talking to strangers, which the strategically-placed newspaper subtly illustrates.



And I know a man in the park
who sleeps on his back on a bench all day
and only gets up when it's dark.

Fig. 2

In contrast to the men, the bodies of the twin aunts, who are sleeping while sitting up on a couch, are not covered with a blanket. Like mother's body, they seem thus more accessible to the child. It should be noted that a black cat, which is sound asleep between the two aunts, does not allow much room for the infant to cuddle up to them.The illustrations of the protagonist of the story, the little child who does not want to go to sleep, reveals a different aspect of human interrelationships. The child in the five illustrations is shown playing

with Mickey Mouse, a toy-friend. In the first illustration, the child, in bright magenta pyjamas, stands on the bed with one arm waving good-bye and the other hand holding Mickey. The following four illustrations of this active child show how the infant gradually settles down: he is shown playing house with Mickey; next he is sitting up while cuddling Mickey; then he is lying down with Mickey sitting on top of him, and finally, he is sound asleep with Mickey sleeping at the end of the bed. The interplay between the child and this favourite toy, Mickey, seems to play-act, in a most innocent manner, sexual relationships between adults. This play is again implied in the page facing the image with the child asleep, because the artist here draws sheep with their baby lambs.

The apparent simplicity of this little book *Sleepers* succeeds in expressing through the illustrations the complex relationships between human beings. In contrast to *My family vacation*, it is a remarkable achievement.

The difference between implied meaning and description of fact can be shown in the illustrations for *Who goes to the park* (Tundra, 1984), by Warabé Aska. The fifteen full-colour pages of this book describe quite literally a sequence of activities related to the twelve months. The artist's admirable ability to compose his elegant and intricately drawn shapes into a complex unity of form and space is evident in each illustration.

The book opens with a sequence of four illustrated pages which seem to refer to March and April. Images of the return of Canada Geese, a large bare tree, and one of children rolling in the grass precede the April page with "lightheaded" boys and girls. The next sequence follows somewhat traditional activities, because May, described in the text as "new lovers, young lovers" shows in the illustration quite literally a young courting couple in tennis gear. The month of June is identified in the text and its illustration shows wedding parties in the park. July refers to motherhood, August to thunderstorms, and September to the Canadian Indian Summers, when the old folks are seen bowling outdoors. October and November lead up to the lengthy winter months, December, January and February. The book begins, therefore, with the initiation of spring and closes in winter. In all these pictures, the unusually coloured sky gives an exotic visual effect which is very striking. No wonder the book was honoured, in 1985, with the First Prize of the City of Toronto Book Award.

There is one curious and puzzling page, however – the illustration about the "lightheaded" boys and girls, presumably suggesting the month of April. The slightly pedestrian text reads:

When yew bushes grow out of bounds
Schoolchildren come to the park.
As gardeners trim shrubs into shape
Small heads look at themselves in the pool.
Let us cut our hair too, before summer.
Boys and girls, boys and girls,
How very lightheaded you'll be!

The accompanying illustration shows a classical French Garden with three rectangular ponds surrounded by neatly-trimmed hedges. The enclosed garden, the *hortus conclusus*, is an age old symbol of virginity. The sequence of three pools divide the space of this enclosed garden into the foreground, middle distance and the background. Closest to us, teenagers with bushy hair bend over the edge of the first pool. Like Narcissus they look at their reflection in the water. The thick blond mane of the girl at the left edge of the pool curiously echoes the classic image of Struwelpeter, the boy who did not want to cut his hair. Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwelpeter* was one of the bestsellers of 19th century children's literature.[22] As a book of moral instruction, it belonged to the gruesome warning tales which thought to instill social and moral improvement in young readers by means of stories about cruel and sadistic punishment.

An even clearer reference to Hoffmann's *Pretty stories and funny pictures*, as the English version of *Struwelpeter* was known, can be seen in the middle distance of Warabé Aska's illustrations (see figure 3). Between the first and the second pool he drew a gardener, with large garden shears in his hand, chasing a terrified girl with a shock of blond hair. The text reads that these school children should have their hair cut. This image, however, is derived from "The story of the thumbsucker", one of Hoffman's frightening tales about a child who sucked his thumb until suddenly a large man showed up, with a big pair

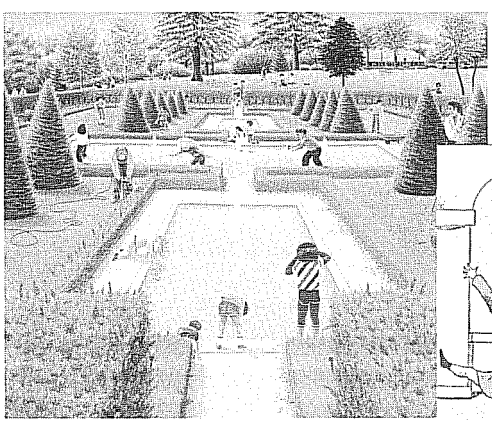
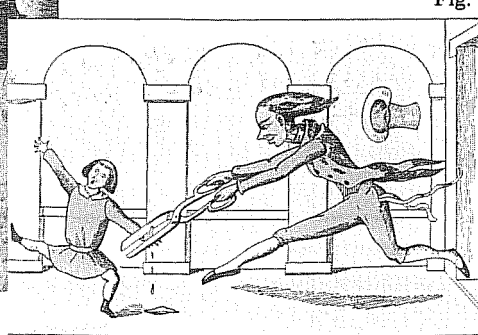


Fig. 3

Fig.



of scissors, and cut both thumbs off.[23] The 19th century illustration shows a tailor running, like the gardener, with his open scissors after the little child (see figure 4). The ghastly implications of this chase certainly must have escaped the eyes of the editor of Tundra Books, as well as the eyes of the jury of the City of Toronto Book Award. To be brief, the overt and implied meaning of this terrifying detail is unacceptable in children's books.

The distinguishing feature of Gilles Tibo's *Simon and the snowflakes* (Tun-

dra, 1988) and his illustrations for Edgar Allan Poe's poem *Annabel Lee* (Tundra, 1987) is the artist's use of an airbrush. This technique enables Tibo to manipulate a gentle interplay of surface textures which, in combination with subtle variations of tonal colour, convey a tranquil mood. *Simon and the snowflakes* is a counting book for very young children. The close range of tones expresses low pressure, while the distribution of the pictorial elements on the page suggests a sense of intimacy and togetherness. Simon's impossible quest, to count snowflakes, is juxtaposed to his "realistic" progress in learning to count. The first image shows Simon "running around" in an autumn landscape, trying to catch individual flakes of the first snow. The second illustration demonstrates that this is impossible while Simon is shown discovering that "many" snowflakes make one heap on his spade. In the third phase he stands on a tree trunk; that is to say, he grows or improves in skills. The four birds flying past him imply that his ability to count, likewise, increases. The next illustration shows Simon cradled in the arms of a friendly snowman from whom he asks advice about how many snowflakes there are. The first exercise in counting basic numbers is implied in the *one* bird, *one* boy, *one* snowman, and the *two* tools. The text complements this task with providing the answer to Simon's question: the snowman equates "many" snowflakes with "many" stars. Simon's quest continues and in the next illustrations he is shown to increase his height by means of a ladder, a snowbank and a mountain. The increasing height, of course, refers to his increased skill in counting. Finally, on the second to last page, when he really has been confused in his counting of city lights, he meets his friends in a friendly forest. There, according to the text, he can't see snowflakes and stars anymore. For the adult reader, the child, who has not been able to see the forest for the trees in his quest to count "how many" this or that, finally gets distracted by his friends and stops asking. A twist of humour is introduced on the last page where Simon happily concludes in the text that he can count some things after all.

Fig. 5

Looking back at all the illustrations in *Simon and the snowflakes*, a consistent pattern emerges as the strength of this book. In a sophisticated yet subtle way, the images invite the child to practice counting. The illustrations amplify the text rather than just provide a visualization of the simple sentences. This amplification of the written text does not impose "closure". Instead, the illustrations leave room to inspire additional counting skills and trigger further ideas about "measure", just a bit ahead of Simon's level on the double page of text and picture. The educational intention combined with this

style of illustrating is ideally suited for preschool children. The real strength of the illustrations does not lie in the formal solutions, like line, plane, composition and colour, but in the artist's ability to conceptualize visually those challenges which inspire the child to count. Therefore, this small and modest book for young children reflects in its illustrations a complex range of meaning.

It might be helpful, at this point, to shift attention from *Simon and the snowflakes* to the illustrations for Edgar Allan Poe's evocative *Annabel Lee*. In both books, Tibo uses the same technique of delicately airbrushed shades of colour. In *Simon and the snowflakes*, this technique reads to imply a poetic gentleness, while in the context of the poem *Annabel Lee*, these soft tonal values suggest a haunting feeling of poetic mystery. In other words, the same characteristics of the style complement two entirely different texts and are then read to carry an entirely different meaning. Our description seems to have reached here a provisional conclusion. The style of the illustration, as we see and understand it, reveals the existence of meaning as one which fluctuates and changes depending on its relation to the written text as the general signifier for interpretation.

A considerable amount of insight into the distinctive nature of meaning in visual images can be gained from a closer reading of the illustrations for *Annabel Lee*. For instance, the two opening lines of the poem read: "It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea." It is necessary to read beyond the more literal assertions of these lines to see how the illustration introduces other, more tentative, meanings that balance the text. In the image, the focus is on the relationship between a boy and a girl standing in a meadow by the sea (see figure 5). The boy leans against a big tree while the girl looks out at seagulls in the distant sky. It is obvious that the flowers in the boy's hand are tokens of his affection for the girl, since in the composition this bouquet is directed towards her. The girl looks away from the boy, but her skirt is blown by the wind towards the boy. The "rhyming" of the bouquet with the skirt forms the two bridges between the couple: the earthly flowers in the boy's hand contrast with the elusive wind causing the skirt to flap, and later causing the girl to drown. This formal device implies the basic theme of *Annabel Lee*, the death of a loved one. Other im-

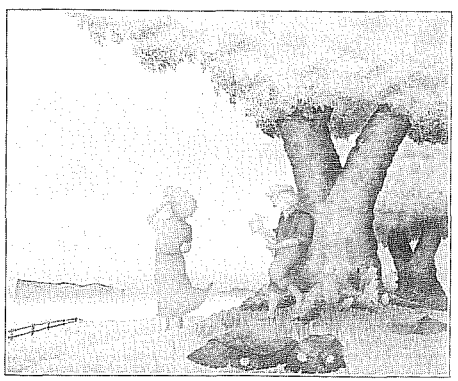


Fig. 6

ages in the picture introduce additional meaning in support of this basic motif. For instance, the distant birds seem to form a halo around the girl, suggesting that she, likewise, will fly away. In contrast, the forked tree, which is firmly rooted in the earth, is located directly behind the boy. In the context of life and death it can be interpreted here as the traditional tree of life, while the fork in this tree usually denotes the concept of man's choice between good and evil. This illustration for the first page of *Annabel Lee* implies, by means of subtle manipulations of pictorial details, the ultimate outcome of the budding love. The artist's visual image thus retraces the poem's development forward: the signifying form produces here the ultimate experience of reading the poem.

This conclusion has brought us back to the question of how meaning is evoked in the illustrations on the subsequent pages. I do not intend to read each one of the ten illustrations. For the sake of convenience, I will concentrate on the narrative sequence between the second and the sixth illustration, because this provides a good example of a complex meaning imbued in a straightforward set of images.

In this interpretative quest, Tibo develops between illustrations two to six the timeless "boy meets girl" motif. He tries to express the relationship between the two lovers in a contemporary context. In this way, he frees his images from the literal ties to the 19th century text. In this suite of four illustrations, Tibo is challenged to depict the poetic experience of innocent, young love, leading to the maturation of human affections.

The text "That a maiden there lived, whom you may know/By the name of Annabel Lee" is illustrated in a page which shows the boy and the girl digging for clams. The girl, who looks amazed, holds a closed clam in her hand, while the boy uses a spade to dig for clams. This innocent image suggests in a delicate way the initiation of sexual activity between boys and girls. The clam clearly signifies the sexual organs of a female while the handle of the spade carries a phallic connotation.

The next image shows the couple running along the shore. The girl teasingly holds a cap out to the boy and he tries to catch it: "And this maiden she lived with no other thought/Than to love and be loved by me." This passage of the text states that the couple is deeply in love, an emotive feeling which is further amplified in the illustration. From the preceding pages we know that the cap actually belongs to the boy, it belongs thus on his head. In this context, the teasing game can be seen as a metaphor of the boy's desire for the girl. Read in this way the illustration implies poetically the maturing of sexuality in the boy and the girl.

The text continues on the following page with "*I* was a child and *she* was a child,/In this kingdom by the sea," two lines which reinforce not only the difference between the boy and the girl but also that they are no longer children. The illustration shows the couple on a grassy knoll overlooking a fishing village and its harbour. The boy "sits on the fence" – which certainly carries more

than a literal meaning for English-speaking readers. He holds a toy boat with a mast; both are contemplating this toy: the girl looks shy and covers her mouth while the boy is visibly pleased. The toy boat, whether one interprets it in a Freudian way or as a symbol of work, implies the future of this couple. This suggestion is reinforced by the grisaille background of village and boats in the harbour. The misty greys of this background transform it into an imaginary scene, a projection of their future domestic happiness.

The fourth image in this sequence supports the text which reads:

But we loved with a love that was more than love –
I and my Annabel Lee –
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.

Tibo emphasizes in his illustration a massive rock with a large hole. The figure of the boy and especially that of the girl are silhouetted against this hole which looks like a huge half circular gate. The blue vista beyond this gate shows an immaculate sky reflected in the tranquil water of the sea. The other-worldliness beyond the gate is contrasted with the foreground where earthly seagulls fly around the couple who stand with their feet in the water. English clichés, such as "they got their feet wet", are sublimated by the stronger motif of the implied transition between the "here" and "there", between heaven and earth. This foreshadows the cataclysmic death of Annabel Lee, shown in the next illustration. The boy's sense of loss, his longing, his sorrow, all are expressed admirably in the next four images. The very last picture, cast in sombre blue and grey tones, concludes this remarkable book. The repetition in the last two lines of the poem – "In the sepulchre there by the sea – / In her tomb by the sounding sea" – evokes the waves of the ocean. The typography of these lines delineates the rectangular shape of a sepulchre. The boy kneels on the beach and with a forked stick he writes the name of his loved one in the sand. This incomplete name, Annabel –, soon will be erased by the waves of the upcoming tide.

Since literary critics of Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee* have expanded on the complex allusions in the poem, I have deliberately concentrated here on the illustrations. In so doing, the visual imagination of Tibo's art combined with the evocative text of the poem takes the reader beyond the literal into a poetic state of mind. It appears then that like text, visual images can manipulate the reader so that he or she "constructs" the text – the reader "writes" the text. In this interaction, there is no closure.

At this point we can understand that subversive meaning is frequently embedded in the visual images of illustrated children's books. It is quite apparent that the criticism of the illustrations in children's literature is an important, yet totally neglected, province of the critical literature on this subject. Future criticism should be conceived as an enterprise, concerned not only with

text but also with inferential meaning of image interpretation. It is interesting to recognize that illustrations in children's literature are a vital component of popular culture. To detect that the unproblematical innocence of these images conceals a covert signification presents an unexpected challenge: it allows communicational processes to associate the illustrations with ideas and concepts of popular culture. Illustrations in children's books contain the world of our experience, waiting for serious consideration by critics.

NOTES

1 The *Nation*, III (December 13, 1866), 466-67.
2 Samuel Osgood, "Books for our children," *Atlantic monthly*, XVI (December, 1865), 724-35.
3 *Ibid.*, 732.
4 *Ibid.*, 732.
5 Sheila Egoff, *The republic of childhood*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 213.
6 May Cutler, "International children's books as art: An editor's view," *Proceedings, children's books international 3*, Boston, 1978, 62.
7 *Ibid.*, 63.
8 Lewis Carroll, "The lobster quadrille," *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, (1865).
9 May Cutler, *op. cit.*, 64.
10 *Canadian childhoods* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1989).
11 May Cutler, *Op cit.*, 64. To illustrate her point, Cutler uses the example of Ann Blades, the author-illustrator of *Mary of mile 18* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1972). Ann Blades exhibited her art successfully in commercial galleries after she had made a name as an illustrator.
12 *Ibid.*
13 *Canadian childhoods, op. cit.* John Finnigan, "A misfit who became a legend, pp. 82, illustrated by Richard Pelham; Lena Newman, "John A. Macdonald: The childhood leader," pp. 16; Miyuki Tanobe, "Celebrating winter in Quebec," pp. 46; Allan Moak, "Toronto: A city for children," pp. 20; Guy Bailey, "A religious childhood in Old Quebec," pp. 58.
14 Shizuye Takashima, *A child in prison camp* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1971). The watercolours in this book are a typical example of unusually sensitive images created by an autodidact.
15 May Cutler, *op. cit.*, 63.
16 *Ibid.*, 64.
17 *The Yale critics: Deconstruction in America*, Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, Wallace Martin eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). See also: *The reader in the text: Essays on audience and interpretation*, Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); *Reader response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, Jane P. Tompkins ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1980).
18 Lewis Carroll, *Op. cit.*, "Alice's evidence."
19 Paul de Man, *Blindness and insight, essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). I have deliberately appropriated Paul de Man's opening phrase in Chapter VII, "The rhetoric of blindness: Jacques Derrida's reading of Rousseau."

20 Isaac Taylor, *Scenes in America for the amusement and instruction of the little Tarry-at-home travellers* (London: Harris & Son, 1821).

21 The popular song "Freeway to love" (Aretha Franklin) is about driving a pink cadillac on the freeway of love. It is doubtful that the age group of *My family vacation* would get this pun.

22 "The story of the thumb-sucker" in Heinrich Hoffmann, *Lustige Geschichten and drolige Bilder* (1844) translated into English as *The English Struwelpeter*; etc. (1848).

23 See note 22. Aska's image might have been inspired by a Dutch version of *Struwelpeter: Het Prentenboek van Tante Pau*, ed. Leonard de Vries and Ilonka Van Amstel (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1974), 105. The illustration of "The story of the thumb-sucker" is less stylized than the one in the original Hoffman edition. This Dutch image seems closer to Aska's illustration of the gardener who chases a girl with his garden shears.

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