"Un penchant pour la diagonale": An interview with Marie-Louise Gay

Marie Davis

Résumé: *Créatrice de livres illustrés tels que* Voyage au clair de lune (Moonbeam on a cat's ear) *et* Charlie chou (Fat Charlie's circus), *Marie-Louise Gay parle ici avec brio de ses intentions et ses techniques.*

One look at the picture books of Marie-Louise Gay says it all: she sees things differently. The originality of her perspective is expressed in cartoon-like illustrations that have no respect for either the confines of the tidy page or the reserve of the straight line. Daring in form and generous in detail, the illustrations are restless – alive with the irrepressible energy of both their whimsical subjects and their risible creator. In an interview in Toronto, while on a promotional tour for *Fat Charlie's circus*, Marie-Louise Gay discussed some of the ideas and sentiments that inspire and sustain her vision.

Davis: You dedicate your latest book, *Fat Charlie's circus*, to your grandmother. Can you tell me about her?

Gay: It would be rather sad to talk about her right now because she's very, very old – she's 96. And she has, in the last couple of years, lost a lot of *lucidité*. So, she's in and out of the world right now. It was because I was thinking a lot about her when I wrote *Fat Charlie* that I dedicated it to her; I think part of the grandmother in *Fat Charlie* is how my grandmother would have liked to have been. You see, she was brought up in a very closed environment by nuns. In a way she was a very proud and prudish woman and just very lovely, very poetic at the same time. So restrained. And since she's sort of "gone into another world" in her mind, she talks about things that have never existed. She invents stuff – adventures she has had. Those stories have nothing to do with climbing trees – but while I was working on *Fat Charlie* I was thinking a lot about her, how she had never lived all these adventures she talks about. As I was working on the book, I saw my grandmother actually become a very giggly

person – she's really very, very funny. And she wasn't a very funny person before; she had a sense of humour, but she wasn't eager to laugh. And so, I guess I was just thinking about her, thinking that that would have been what she would have liked to have done: Climb up a tree in running shoes!

Davis: Been more spontaneous?

Gay: Yes, she had no chance to just let herself go with the way she was brought up – no way.

Davis: Was she around when you were growing up?

Gay: Part of the time. We lived in a lot of different places all over Canada until I was twelve, so during that time we'd maybe see her once in every three years or so. But after twelve, she was living in Montreal so I saw her quite often; I really love her a lot.

Davis: Was she able to watch you develop as an artist?

Gay: Well, my artistic side didn't really show for a long time, but I guess she has seen my work over the years. I don't think she was aware of what I was doing until I was eighteen. Then later when my books for children started coming out she was very interested, and proud of me.

Davis: As a child, were you an habitual scribbler or doodler – did you decorate your pages all the time?

Gay: I started doodling all the time around fifteen or sixteen; before that I think I was just like any child – not more artistic than any other.

Davis: Were you able to take art in college?

Gay: No, I never took art until I was almost nineteen, except for the ordinary art classes you had in school – nothing specialized. I just didn't have an artistic bent. But then I suddenly discovered it around the age of sixteen. From sixteen to eighteen I started drawing a lot – so I wasn't a child prodigy at all. But once I started, I really never stopped. At the time I was going to Jean de Brébeuf, a private college, and I didn't know where I was going, so I was getting really bad marks. But, I was doodling and drawing a lot and, finally, around the end of the year my mother suggested "Well, why don't we try going to an art school?" because there was no hope. I thought of being a history teacher, but I have no memory at all. I didn't know what I was doing; it was a bad part of my life. And then I went to this art school, which was actually not a real art school, it was a graphic design school: *The Institute of Graphic Arts of Montreal*. I really loved it because it was easy for me. But I think I was too restrained because it was graphic arts – really technical stuff.

So a year after I switched to *L'École du Musée des Beaux Arts de Montréal* where I spent two years in animation. There I got my first real art classes, with models and everything. At the same time, I was doing a lot of cartoony things, so I said, well, I'm going to try to sell my cartoons – you know, those cartoon strips with three images. I just went around to magazines until one finally bought some. And after that I just started publishing. I was doing editorial illustration and stuff like that while I was finishing those two years.

So I learnt a lot by myself. I would come back from school and just get into illustration. I'm really self-taught in that sense; I didn't get enough classes.

Davis: But then you went to San Francisco?

Gay: Yes, but I went when I was 26; I had already been publishing for four or five years in magazines and I had been doing a bit of graphic design. I decided to do one year in San Francisco at *The Academy of Art College*, which is a really good illustration school. I just loved it there. At the same time, of course – since I can never stop – I went around looking for work. When I started getting work there I decided I wouldn't leave, so I stayed for three years. I just took classes the first year I was there and then kept on going for three years working at editorial stuff again and educational books for children. Then I finally decided to come back to Montreal.

Davis: It surprises me that you didn't draw or doodle a lot as a child.

Gay: A lot of people are surprised. But I just wasn't interested in art or drawing at all. But one thing I was doing that has a real connection with this is *reading*. I learned to read before I went to school and I am an avid reader – I need a fix; I have to read all the time. And I have been like that since I was five years old.

Davis: Did you have a favourite book?

Gay: Oh, I had *thousands* of favourite books. I read and re-read C.S. Lewis's Narnia tales, Enid Blyton's stories, and, of course, the Nancy Drew mysteries and The Hardy Boys adventures. The very first book I remember reading was *Curious George*. I read it all by myself when I was very, very young and I remember being alone reading it and screaming out to my mother in another room, "What does such and such mean?" after I had spelled out to her some of the words I didn't know! These are all English books, of course. Once I started reading I was living in English places and going to English primary schools, so that was the language I learned to read in. But I did read French books, too. When I was very young, my mother read *Capitaine Pat* to me and I remember those illustrations very well. I thought they were wonderful. Just recently, I saw it at the library and thought I would bring it home for my kids. But then I read the book and decided not to: the illustrations were too sweet, too saccharine. There were pictures of children with enormous eyes and wispy hair – a very 50's style of illustration, and not one that I really like. I also read *Babar* and a lot of Hergé's *Tintin*, which I found graphically interesting. As I got older, I read and re-read Tolkein and certain cartoon albums from France which were graphically very sophisticated.

I just read all the time. I probably wasn't drawing because I was reading. To me, drawing when you're a child or teenager is more like a time of meditation. With me, I think reading took up that time. My parents would bring me to the library every week-end. And I think that's what probably didn't let me draw – I just didn't feel the need to draw.

Davis: So books were your playground, then?

Gay: Oh, yes, they really were – more than anything else.

Davis: What about childhood memories – do you have any ones that, for whatever reason, stand out, or ones that you're particularly fond of?

Gay: Well, I think a lot of the memories I do have of my childhood – they keep popping up at all sorts of different moments – but what I mostly think of are the trips we used to make, because we travelled all over Canada and the United States by car. That's what I would call the most memorable things of my childhood: those trips and reading books. And what happens is that some of my books are based on ideas that are very close to me, things that I lived in my childhood. But they're not *extraordinary* things. *Rainy day magic*, for example, was a book that came from remembering afternoons in Vancouver in our basement. In Vancouver it was always pouring rain; my sister and I would play in the basement and get bored and always wish something would happen. That just popped up in my mind all of a sudden and I realized, well, I could do that now. I could make something happen. So, I just invented the story from that. It's not a very important childhood incident, really. But the boredom was an important incident, in a certain sense. For children boredom is *very* pressing. So probably it had a bigger impact than I thought. It's just snatches from my childhood that come back to me – little bits.

Davis: Is *Fat Charlie's circus* that way – based on a snippet of memory?

Gay: The first idea for *Fat Charlie's circus* actually was that I wanted to do a book about the circus, because I really love the circus. And then I tied it in with my grandmother and it just came together. Maybe it will happen to me, one day, where I will get the idea for the whole story at once. . .bang! But I don't remember anything really special that I could tell in one complete story – maybe that's why I invent so much. Maybe because I don't remember having something really incredibly exciting happen to me.

Davis: So you're filling up a void?

Gay: Well, yes, maybe that's it. You see, really people's lives are quite *calm*. And it seems to me that the child's imagination wants more than that. I think as adults we want more than that also. We want excitement, we want adventure, we want to *fall in love*. And it *does* happen, but it doesn't happen *all the time*. And I think it's the same thing with kids: they want that difference, that excitement. We all have a need for flying away with our imaginations. I do it on paper.

Davis: What are your drawing habits? Do you carry sketchbooks around with you and doodle in them?

Gay: I always have some paper around and a little pad or something on me. I think I mostly draw at my table now. I used to do a lot of sketching outside, but I just don't seem to have time anymore to do that (which is too bad actually). I'll often take very, very tiny visual notes about things that I'll notice like the edge of a carpet or a little kid who just did something funny, or the position he was in. I just find that kind of thing really intriguing.

Davis: You're very good at that. In *Rainy day magic*, for instance, there's a crayon that has just been squished by a tricycle and it's at that point where it has snapped and has left a drag of colour across the floor – the pages of your books are always crammed with details like that and this has become a hall-mark of your work.

Gay: Well, I don't have to take sketches of that – with my kids around, I've got them all over my floors. But I think I have a very strong visual memory, compared to anything else I have in my head. I forget names and I don't know any phone numbers at all – except mine and my boyfriend's office number. But visual memory I have. That I know. It's just snap, snap, snap all the time. I re-member once going to do a reading way up north in Kapuskasing or somewhere like that and going for a supper in the parish hall with all the people from the area, and then going to the bathroom and seeing the most *beautiful* bathroom tile I have ever seen in my life. I just adored the pattern. So I took out my pen and stood there doing a drawing of the pattern, just in case, one day, I'd need it somewhere and I'd just look through my book and say, "Oh, that's nice," and I'd use it as a detail in an illustration.

So, I take that type of note, but then I take a lot of written notes for ideas I have all of a sudden for a story. It may not even be a story; it could be just an incident – a tiny little incident. To give you an example, I wrote a puppet play, *Bonne fête, Willy*, last year and it's playing right now at *The National Arts Centre*. I brought Gabriel, my eldest son, to see it, and he was quite excited about it. When he came home, he immediately went upstairs and got his hand puppets – a rabbit and a wolf – and he crawled under the blanket on the living-room couch, stuck his two hands out and began doing a little puppet show there. All of a sudden, he lifts the blanket up and says "Bonne fête, Lapin!" An incident like that I'll write down and try to remember. And then maybe in a book it'll just show up in the corner of a story where you'll have one of the kids who crawls underneath a blanket, does a quick puppet show and then crawls back out. Because sometimes when I'm really getting into a story, into the drawing part – the part where for three months I'm really just doing the draw-ings and where I develop all the outside or inside elements, everything but the story which is there already – that's when I use ideas like that for a sub-story. Because of my involvement with puppets, I was thinking of having puppets be-hind the scenes for my next story, *Willy Nilly*. So, those are the notes I take.

Davis: What makes a story or an illustration really interesting for you?

Gay: Illustrations that are detailed, that are exciting, that leap off the page, and that you feel are moving. This would probably describe my illustrations a bit because I like them to move, and I like the book to become a receptor, you know, of that movement.

Davis: I often feel with *Angel and the polar bear* that if you tipped it on the diagonal everything would fall out.

Gay: All the water would fall out! That's what I like in illustrations. But I also

like really *calm* illustrations; I like Chris Van Allsburg, for example. *Polar express* and *Jumanji* I find very exciting graphically, but when you look at them there's a powerful, serene sense to the illustrations. *Polar express* is so gorgeous and then you look at what he did with *Two bad ants* – completely different, but fabulous. In the text, I want a story that will make me react to it – I'll find it funny, I'll find it sad: it has to touch me. I really *can't stand* very sweet stories about bears in the woods taking a walk: I just don't see the point of this. This has been done and done and done! There are some lovely books coming out with these stories and they have lovely illustrations. But I read the story and think "Yea, and *then what*? *Please*, let's have something happen; isn't a tree going to fall?" Something that's exciting and that emotionally touches you: that's what I try to get when I write. That's why I haven't done any animal stories yet – I might do some, but so far I haven't felt the need. I want kids to identify with the kids in the story – even if they don't look like those kids, I want them to identify with the feel, the aura around the kids I draw. Fat Charlie is a fat kid, right. Plump with red hair. There's a lot of fat kids and a lot of kids with red hair, but with that combination there's not that many. Still, what I think is important is what Fat Charlie is living in *his* adventure. The fact that he's just breaking the house apart with his *dream*, and the fact that he gets caught in a corner in his own dream – he's stuck, and he's sad and he's anguished about it and I want kids to identify with that. They'll understand what happened to him. Even if they haven't climbed a tree – that's not important. The fact that once he's up there he's afraid people will laugh at him; and he's afraid period – *that's what's important.*

And his grandmother doesn't say, "Get the heck out of that tree!" She just does the same thing he does; she says, "I'm going to jump and I'm going to be famous" – which makes him realize that notion was pretty stupid.

Davis: It's the limits of the imagination that you're touching on there. I find that one of the interesting themes that you develop in your books. I want to get back to your mentioning of Chris Van Allsburg: what about other influences, other works you admire, Canadian or otherwise?

Gay: There's so many. I'll start with Canadian. I love Bob Munsch's books for the stories, and for the illustrations, too, but I would say that they're really storybooks for me. The two Zooms are my favourite Canadian books at the moment. Maryann Kovalski's illustrations I just love.

Davis: What about Stéphane Poulin?

Gay: That's another style of illustration that I appreciate. He has such a beautiful painterly technique. For me, there are different levels of appreciation. With some illustrators their techniques are fabulous, but I personally might not want them for a storybook. In American books, I just adore Chris Van Allsburg, Maurice Sendak, and Henrik Drescher. *Simon's book* is the absolute favourite of my two-year old. I've read it so many times, but I just love it. I just found an incredibly *beautiful* book by André Dahan, a French author, called

Bonjour lune [*My friend the moon*]. It's not at all my style of illustration – serene and with a wonderful sense of atmosphere.

Davis: Are you influenced by these people, or you do you just admire these works?

Gay: I think that's all part of one bag. I don't draw like Chris Van Allsburg, but I'm sure I'm influenced somewhere by him. There's some place in there where I think we understand the same thing: the sense of *wonder* that children want in books.

Davis: Can you think of anything that you learned from these other illustrators/writers?

Gay: Well, you really can't put your finger on that. I just read a book and, if I enjoy it, I just take that enjoyment and try to transfer it into my books. I feel that enjoyment when I look at the work of Edward Gorey, one of my heroes. He did some books with Florence Parry Heide, two small books about a tree growing money and about a boy with a magic game, *The shrinking of Treehorn* and *Treehorn's treasure*. They're both so well done. I sort of panic when people ask me who I admire because I'm afraid to leave someone out.

There's Phillipe Béha, of course – he's a good friend of mine and he does wonderful illustrations. Often the texts he illustrates are not up to par with the illustrations, I find. To me a book is a whole, you see. You can have the best illustrations in the world and if the text is really nothing it's just not a book and vice versa. You have to have both: you have to be able to read a story and *see* the story.

Davis: Do you think of yourself as a writer/illustrator, as an illustrator first or as a writer first?

Gay: If you had asked me "Would you rather just write a book or just illustrate a book?", I would say that I'd rather just illustrate a text that someone else has written. I would *never* write for someone else's illustrations. Oh, that would drive me *completely crazy*. I could not do it. But the contrary, yes. If I had a good story, I would love to illustrate it.

Davis: One of the things that has been said about your work is that you have a children's drawing style of illustration. I'm not so sure about this. Kids' drawings are exaggerated to some extent – the angles tend to be awkward and the proportions and perspective distorted. Do you think that you have a child's drawing style?

Gay: I wouldn't say that at all.

Davis: Have you ever drawn realistically?

Gay: I can. For example, in the classes I took in San Francisco I had very, very realistic drawings to do, you know, perfect renderings of everything. I can do it. But it doesn't interest me at all. I like going crazy with a drawing. But if you look at my drawings and you say, okay, everything's distorted and the kids are fat, you have to look closer. If you look *underneath* those clothes. . . .just try to imagine Fat Charlie *naked*. Have you ever tried to imagine that? He has

to look like *something*: he has to fill up those clothes. Well, I draw him naked because I have to find out how his body works underneath his clothes. Just imagine him: skinny, skinny legs, big fat belly! Now, that's important to me because as much as you can distort a drawing there is something there that you would feel is wrong if you didn't *see* the body underneath. This is in general; I'm not saying that I keep on drawing Fat Charlie naked all the time! In a way, when people say everything's distorted, they're missing a lot – all the shadows and all the things are real; everything works. I couldn't *not* make it work. But on a different plane it works. In a different world.

Davis: I've noticed with your pictures of animals, like the tiger and the lion, there's an element of realism there, especially with the tiger in *Rainy day magic*.

Gay: In the case of the tiger – and most of the animals in *Rainy day magic* – I used pictures of different tigers just to get the markings right. So there are

elements that are realistic in a way. But in other ways they're not. For example, if you look at the face of the tiger, it's much bigger than it should be. Actually, a tiger has a much smaller head, but I don't like small heads, so I've just enlarged it.

Davis: Small heads and small bodies are out.

Gay: Skinny legs, small feet are in! I just like it like that. That's the way I see things. So I do use information like that from pictures of tigers, but I don't copy, obviously.

Davis: The way you *see* things psychologically also interests me. Your books usually center on one theme, with variations – that's the idea of the discovery or invention of something new. That something new is also potentially dangerous. What are you suggesting about the powers of the imagination there?

Gay: I guess, really, that what I'm getting at here is that children *imagine* a hell of a lot of things – that's just part of their world. The borderline between imagination and reality is very, very *thin*. I'm not suggesting at all that it's dangerous. I'm just getting into it as kids get into it, as kids *want to scare themselves*. We've all read books by Maurice Sendak where a kid lies in bed all night with a monster in a closet. I think all kids imagine that. There's a phrase – I

don't know it in English – *ils se complaisent dans la peur* (they enjoy being afraid). They're scaring themselves or imagining these terrible scenarios where their parents are going to abandon them at the next street. Kids do this. And kids also have the other type of more positive scenario where they're going to be famous, so they imagine from that. They create *enormous* dramas about – what seem to us – very small events. They imagine that there's something else behind an incident. My little boy just lost one of his brand new gloves and he was crying like he was going to die the next day. I was worried and he wouldn't tell me for the longest time why he was crying. You wonder what's *behind* all that. But you'll never know, of course.

That's the beautiful thing about it: we never *do* know, we just sort of have to guess. That's where I start off from: I guess, I ask, "what does that mean?" I might use that as the subject of a book: the glove. What could a kid be imagining? That it was a magic glove? It just seems that children have such a potential in their imaginations.

Davis: In each and every book, though, what happens is that the child imagines this world, invents it or discovers it, and then it leads into something that is dangerous. It's almost as though the world they create through their imaginations is a fragile one, because it's susceptible to their fears. It can be easily destroyed. What I'm trying to get at, too, is whether or not you see this as a natural thing that children do; in other words, that through the safety of play they can confront their fears.

Gay: Oh, definitely. Exactly, that's it. Look at Fat Charlie who wants to be in the circus – this is a very positive thing, but I think that a child in a way knows that he *won't* become a famous circus person right away. He could. But he *knows* there's a possibility he won't. So, in going up into the tree, he's provoking the bad thing to happen. Actually the child understands a lot more than we think.

Davis: What is peculiar to your vision is that the children in your stories seem almost to be saying, "I know there's something bad out there and I'm going to confront it."

Gay: Probably a lot of that is me. People often ask me: "When you write a book, do you think as a child?" I think we just put our adult feelings in a children's book. So if someone should read my books and decide to analyze them, they would probably find out a lot of things that I don't want to know about. The need for confrontation and all the fears are all there from the moment we're born; and they're still there when I'm writing books 37 years later – the *same fears* are there. The thing is, where are they in your body? Are they on the surface of your body, or are they so deep down that they don't show in your life? I have the peculiarity of being a creator – an illustrator, a writer – and those things come out on the surface. So I have a transparent skin, which is sort of frightening.

Davis: One of the things that is central to your vision is that the action of your

books takes place either in the absence of grown-ups or in the imagination – most of the time it's both. Do you ever concern yourself with whether or not a book will prove instructive?

Gay: No, I really don't. I think there are things I really want to say in a book, and I appreciate it when children get the "underidea". But, as you know, there's not much in the way of moral endings in my books or happily-ever-after ones.

Davis: So, your characters are never taught things; they invent them or discover them for themselves? I think of poor Charlie sitting up in the tree while night is falling.

Gay: Yes, that's my favourite image in the book. He's there only with his cat. And with his thoughts, of course. He really has learned something, you see. Did you notice in that image there's no mice or anything around the borders – he's *really, really alone*. That's an unconscious thing I did. I just didn't put them in. The feeling of the illustration was that he was alone, alone.

Davis: There's no frame around that picture either.

Gay: There's a little frame around the text and little clouds within the frame – that's it. There's a lot of things that I really can't control when I'm drawing. They just happen and when I look back I can understand why I did them. They usually make sense in the rationale of the story.

I'm very alone when I work, and I feel that in some ways I have to be. I do a lot of my conceptual work when I'm travelling and when, during the summers, I'm living at a place in the south of France in the mountains. There I'm left alone because we don't have a phone, so I think a lot about my work. But I'm especially alone when finishing the drawings, when I'm in my studio and I'm very concentrated. Often I just feel after a day like that when, at four o'clock, *bang*, I have to go get the kids, that I'm stepping out of a room – and I'm not talking about my studio, I'm talking about a room here [pointing to head]. I really have trouble getting out of the fog I was in, having been really into the drawing. When I'm really concentrating on these parts, I rarely listen to any music or anything else – nothing is going on at all in my house – there's only the cat padding around.

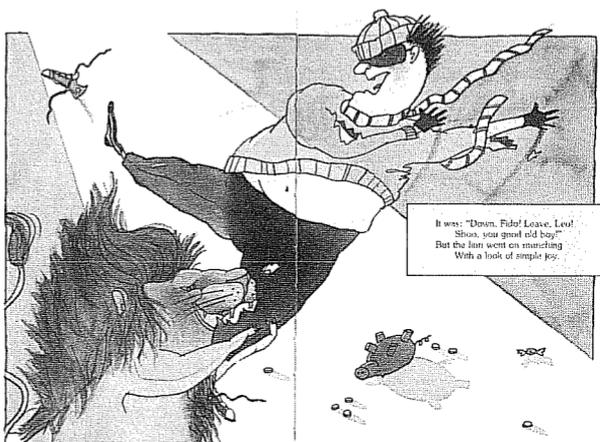**Davis:** In a sweater?

Gay: Depends if the heat's on!

Davis: What is the difference between working with your own text and working with someone else's (for example, Dennis Lee's)?

Gay: Well, of course, the difference is that I have less control because I can't change anything in the text. Often, I will write things into my *own* text, take them out at the last minute, or just throw away a drawing and do another one.

But when it's not my text, I feel that I have to really respect the *rhythm* of the author's words, of his thought, in the story. If it's a good story, like *Lizzy's lion*, there's no problem at all. Since *Lizzy's lion*, as you've noticed, I haven't illustrated a book written by someone else. I have been offered a few stories (probably ten at the most in five years) but I haven't accepted one because it's

too much work for me to start illustrating a story that I don't like very much and then try to make it better by the illustrations. That doesn't work; it may be an okay book, but I won't be happy with it. And I *have* to be happy with it. When I read *Lizzy's lion*, I just loved the story. Little did I know how much trouble it would be to do it. (I didn't even know who Dennis Lee was until *after* I had submitted my illustrations to the publisher!) When you get the story it's all typewritten out on sheets of paper. You have the scene where the lion eats the robber – and it's just typed out – I read it through and thought it was really funny, especially the part where the lion "gave the rotten robber an experimental chew"! And then I laid out the book, and I put so much text to the page. After, I realized that I had *four double-paged spreads* where the lion was eating the robber! So, this of course gave me a clue to the whole thing: that was okay, I could deal with it. But *how* was the problem. It took a lot of soul searching about how I was going to do it without drawing bones and blood and everything. And I managed finally to do it without one drop of blood in the book.

It was: "Down, Fido! Leave, Leo!
Shoo, you good old boy!"
But the lion went on munching
With a look of simple joy.

Davis: How do kids respond to that story and your illustrations?

Gay: When I read it to the kids – in a way it's not fair, it's much better when Dennis Lee reads it – they just find it *so* funny.

Davis: Does it appeal to their sense of justice?

Gay: I think it appeals to their sense of wanting to have power and control. A lot of people I know are not for *Lizzy's lion*: there's violence in the book, they say, and "that's bad." That's their problem, let me tell you. But what I think is that Lizzy has total control of this book. Every kid who reads this book must identify with Lizzy: she's the kid who knows the magic word. So she has total control. What's so scary about that? That's not scary: she can do anything with the lion. And kids are often in states of anger against authority (parents or whoever) and I'm sure they often want to kill people. I don't know if you should quote me on this – people are going to think I'm crazy. But I think kids get to the point where they say, "I hate you," and they say it with a passion. So there you have a little girl with a lion who can eat that authority figure (in this case

a bad guy, a robber) and she can do something about her lack of control. That seems to me to be *perfect* – what a perfect thing for a child, when you can control your own fears.

Even the most passive kid thinks *Lizzy's lion* is great. To me what is more scary – and I'm not against it because I think kids need this kind of story too – is *Little Red Riding Hood*. Now that is an eerie story. And depending on the ending – every different publisher has done different endings – either the wolf eats up Little Red Riding Hood and the grandmother, or they sew rocks into the wolf – but finally it's just this woodcutter who saves them all. But what if he didn't come? God, that's really scary.

Davis: That's a more powerful fear that's being addressed there?

Gay: To me it is much more powerful. So when people say to me that *Lizzy's lion* is so terrible, I say, "Did you read *Little Red Riding Hood*" and they say, "Yes, it's one of my favourite fairy tales."

I'm not at all against reading that type of story either to children, I'm really not. It's just that to compare the two stories and then to hear people saying, O my God, how could you illustrate such a story? I say: Read it to your child, you'll see why it appeals.

A child would never be able to say – if you ask why did you like *Lizzy's lion*? – well, it's just that I felt that I needed someone to protect me from fears and scary things. That's not the way a kid will react at all. He'll probably just say I like the part when we see the *bare bum* of the robber!

Davis: Your books usually tell of a journey, an incident or a confrontation that almost inevitably symbolizes some kind of growth in understanding. Now, that's measured, it seems, by changing representations of light, and the depiction of doors and windows and roads as well. My question is whether or not the changing light and the depiction of doors, windows, and roads usually corresponds with different levels of a character's understanding and whether or not the roads are symbolic paths to understanding or wisdom. Think of *Fat Charlie's circus* when Charlie is sitting in the tree by himself, surrounded by darkness; in *Rainy day magic* there's darkness and then the characters move, without knowing it, on to the tiger's back; in *Moonbeam on a cat's ear* there's the darkened doorway with Rosie and Toby Toby just standing there staring out into the night together. So that's the changing light that I'm talking about – does that coincide with different levels of a character's understanding of something?

Gay: That's interesting. I guess it's a bit like breathing for me. You need pauses in a book – dramatic pauses in a book that enable you to change the tempo. The time where you're in between two parts of a story is very important because you have something like a changing room in between, you know, where you're thinking, here we are and now what's going to happen. It's a dramatic highlight in a story. But it happens *inside the mind* of a child, where a child realizes that something has happened, so I try to depict it graphically be-
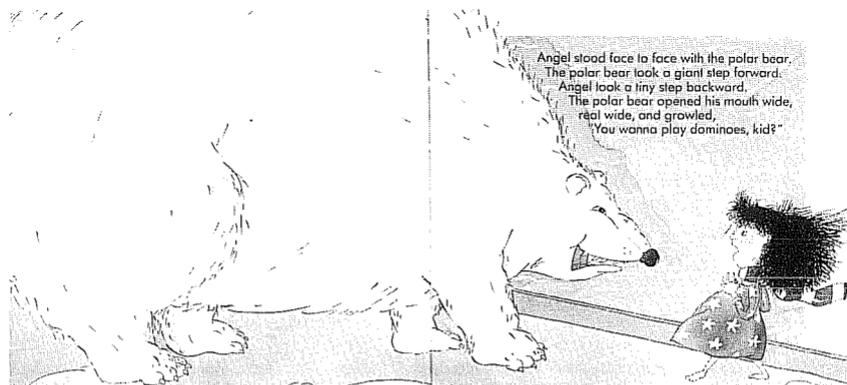
cause I can't show the inside of a child's mind. And so in my drawing, if something is going to happen, I will change the tempo of the story. I will either bring it from reality to fantasy, or in *Fat Charlie's circus*, for example, from complete craziness and happiness and daring to an understanding of, boy, am I ever stupid, what am I doing here.

Davis: So, you represent it as the sun having gone down and the lights having gone out. It's often represented by darkness.

Gay: But it doesn't seem to me that it's darkness in the sense of losing all consciousness. I think the darkness means calm to me. To try to illustrate this point I should talk about *Angel and the polar bear* because there is no moment of darkness in *Angel*. To me the moment that would be the equivalent to that darkness is when the polar bear is waddling down the hallway, where he takes up all the space on the page and you see Angel there, a tiny figure. And that to me is the moment when Oh, oh here we go – something is going to go wrong this time, or something is going to happen. That would be the equivalent of a change in how Angel sees things, and there's no darkness there.

Davis: Yes, it's completely white space.

Gay: Yes, and the white space is taking over. There are actually two points in the story where there's a change, a dramatic pause. The other is when they [Angel and the polar bear] are nose-to-nose.

Angel stood face to face with the polar bear.
The polar bear took a giant step forward.
Angel took a tiny step backward.
The polar bear opened his mouth wide,
real wide, and growled,
"You wanna play dominoes, kid?"

Davis: There's a visual imbalance in that illustration – so perhaps that provides a jolt.

Gay: I would say the real in-betweener in that story is when the polar bear licks his lips and slowly waddles towards the bedroom. And, of course, since I can't help adding a tiny sub-plot, I put a little cat sort of stuck there on the polar bear with his headband on! Not very many people notice that. That to me is like – this word doesn't work very well in English, but in French it's *un clin d'oeil* – when you wink at someone. It's like an inside joke. There's this cat hanging on to the bear as if saying "it's okay, I've got him, I've got him, I'll stop him!" And you have a whole story going on in this one little spot down there, which a lot of kids, I was really surprised to find, haven't noticed be-

cause they're so caught up in that big moment of confrontation. So, that comes at the third or fourth level of reading.

Davis: Are all of those details there to spur the child's imagination?

Gay: Yes. They all come in the last stages of drawing. I don't have all these things going on in the initial stages of drawing – the cats, mice, all the extra things going on are all added afterward. After I've made the pen line of my major drawing – that's when it all starts boiling over. It's after that that I start putting in all the sub-stories and the sub-details because to me that's a really important part of the book. But it just doesn't go with the main story; it has to be done apart from that. If I plan it in advance, it would look contrived to me.

Davis: So you don't start with a coherent whole, you work with bits and pieces up to a coherent whole and you watch it gradually emerge?

Gay: In a way, yes, I start with bits of ideas and bits of drawings and paper scribbles and go back and forth between them until a skeleton story emerges and then I go back to the drawings and flesh them out. The details are my *secret* stories underneath the main story.

Davis: To get to the second part of this question about doors, windows, and roads going up the middle of a page. Are they symbolic paths?

Gay: They are, to me, reminders of the outside. The impression I have is that a book is an object in itself. It is contained. The reason that my drawings try to get out of the books is that I want to give the impression that they are part of the real world. My drawings go *out into* the real world. Now, the problem with that is that I have to work with the edges, you see. But if I make a path that goes this way, it suggests that behind the book there's other stuff, and if I open a window over that way, it says there's something else, you see. And then it permits me to create other little worlds.

In *Fat Charlie's circus*, for instance, there are all the borders that go around the different pictures. But just outside of these borders there's some sky and different things happening, and they offer little parallel universes. Like the sub-plots, what's behind the borders just gives more richness to my illustrations – more levels.

For example, in *Rainy day magic* you see the kids on the back of the tiger, and in the background you see the banana trees, which were just plants in an earlier illustration. Every object in the first three pages of *Rainy day magic* is found elsewhere in the book. I have transposed them and, in some cases, have given them a new life. Banana plants become banana trees; you'll find a pair of sunglasses in a little drawer and later they'll be on the cat and then on the starfish; a floppy toy rabbit becomes a real rabbit paddling along in his inner tube. All the objects flow through the book. *Rainy day magic* is really an excessive book in that sense, where I really made a completely different story with those details. And some kids have noticed it. I even met a wonderful librarian out here in Toronto who had actually noticed it and had run a contest with

a group of children. They found something like 30 objects that flow and change throughout the book. So, I do that just to give more *outlook* and more *richness* in a book. I'm not about to tell anyone what a book is about. That's for the kids: let them find out themselves.

Davis: This is all very fitting, too, for stories that are about discovery.

Gay: But I'm not exactly saying, "Hey, you, discover this." I'm saying, "Look, who knows, what's behind this window? Who knows? Maybe we should go look!"

Davis: A lot of the details in your books concern the antics of animals – the cats, mice and fish in your books are given personalities. What's the appeal of humanized animals?

Gay: I just see animals that way; I have the impression they have thoughts and feelings. I talk to my cat as if it were one of my children. With certain animals I don't have that impression, and so I don't draw them. In my next book I have a turtle and a rabbit, and I think I've shown their personalities.

Davis: Would it be fair to say that Nature devoid of human manipulation doesn't interest you that much? I think, of course, of your animals, but also of your trees that have drawings within them.

Gay: Yes, it's all part of that world that I'm creating in my work. You could say the same of the objects in my books which aren't really steady: they have a certain character to them. They are alive. Things that are stuck in cement really don't interest me.

Davis: Yes, you're not interested in vertical lines. Nothing in your work says stability. It says solidity, but not stability.

Gay: Often what happens is that I'll start a drawing and there's something that bothers me, it doesn't move, so I'll just start twisting it. And then, there, now we're set in the right space. If it's too firm, it doesn't work. There's something in that perspective that just doesn't appeal to me.

Davis: One of the distinctive features of your work is the use of the frame. I was wondering if you could say something about the relationship between framing and meaning, between, for instance, visual and emotional constraint.

Gay: I think the relationship is different depending on the perspective in the illustration itself. The frame gives an in and out, an outside and an inside in a drawing. It sometimes will hold things that I judge to be important in the way of dramatic focus. And little things going around the frame give it movement which will make something even *more* dramatic, because you have all these fuzzy things going around the middle which is set.

Davis: Are you speaking about frames *within* an illustration?

Gay: Yes.

Davis: Often a frame *around* a picture can make it seem neat and tidy, less energetic.

Gay: But the frames move and breathe in my pictures. *Fat Charlie's circus* is

really the best example of my use of frames, because some of the frames lift off and all of a sudden aren't in the picture anymore. I think of when he's in the tree and there's a crowd around him: there the frame goes off on an angle
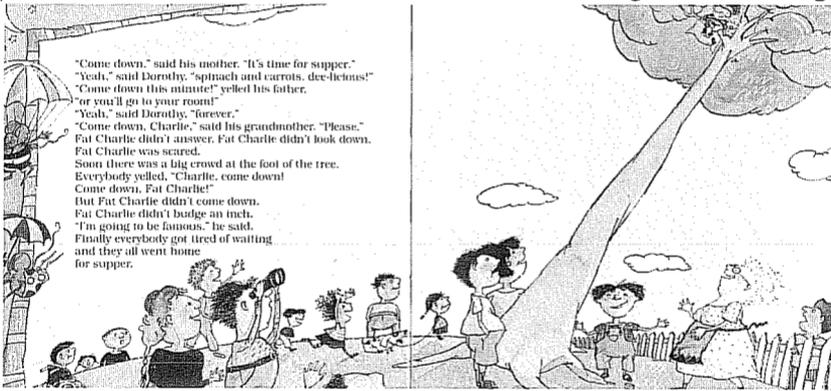

so that Fat Charlie in the tree is not framed which gives more perspective to the drawing; the tree seems very tall, but it also separates Fat Charlie from the crowd, underlining his aloneness and his daring. A lot of this is intuitive. I just start drawing and feel the need to create different perspectives that focus on things. To me, that example of having the frame open up is like – *zoom* – all the importance goes to Fat Charlie who's way up there in the tree. There's a lot of camera work in my books.

Now, in *Angel and the polar bear* there are no frames, but throughout the book the water or ice bleeds off the page at the bottom and on the sides, creating a flowing horizontal movement – as if the bottom of the book was floating in the water. The top half of the book is squared off, limited by the white border. So, it's very solid on top and very liquid or icy on the bottom. That's another way of playing with frames, but they're less visible.

Davis: When you think of a framed work of art, you think of the formality and detachment of viewing it from a distance. Are you calling attention to the artificiality of the artwork at all?

Gay: In *Fat Charlie's circus* there is a certain sense of that, of camera movements, of this focussing – it's more conscious of playing with perspective. I'm putting barriers on my work and I'm deliberately breaking them. In other books it was more subtle. But *Fat Charlie's circus* is more of a "normal" story. There is no polar bear coming out of a refrigerator, no tigers in the basement. You might consider that the grandmother climbing that tall tree is far-fetched, but her action is very possible. There was no inventing of fierce animals or crazy things, but there was the emotion to zoom in on and, of course, the substory of the two mice which is happening mostly out of the frame.

Davis: You're playing also, then, with the boundaries of art and reality. How art is beyond reality and art is within reality as well. What about the frames of white space, do you use them to create balance? *Moonbeam on a cat's ear* is
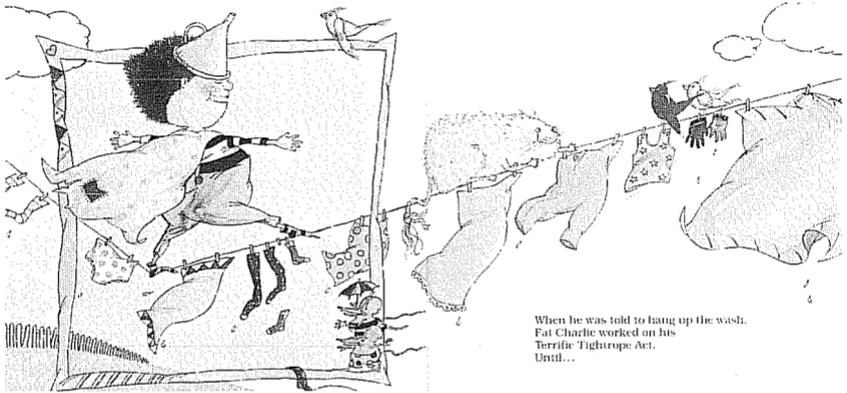
When he was told to hang up the wash,
Fat Charlie worked on his
Terrific Tightrope Act.
Until...

a quieter book and I'm wondering if part of that stems from there being white space surrounding each page.

Gay: Yes, I would think so. I also think it's the fact that it's a night book, a moon book. It's also a book that I wrote for younger children, as you can see the text is very sparse – if it's there at all. It's very simple. I *love* moon books! I'm actually working on another moon book – which I'm very excited about – but it won't be as serene as *Moonbeam on a cat's ear*. The quietness, the serenity in *Moonbeam* is also due to the contrast between the bluish light and the stark white light. Everything seems to float in space.

Davis: So, the white gives it a more static quality, or quiet quality?

Gay: It's the contrast between the two. It's not just the white, it's the blue compared to the white. The whole book is very blue. And as you've seen, I had tiny little borders in there, but they're not too intrusive. They have little things happening in them, but they're much calmer, like little paintings.

But also that book is done in a different technique. It's on gesso which gives it all the texture, all the lines. That's white paint mixture that I put on the gesso board. I let it dry with the brushstrokes in it and on top of that I put the ink and the watercolour and so the texture comes out, like ridges. If you put your hand on the drawing you would feel the hard ridges. And the way it was printed, you could see that; it was just fabulous.

Davis: The books that focus more centrally on action, *Angel and the polar bear*, for instance, either don't have the frames of white space or you play around with them, or you just don't allow them at all. You've moved away from using frames of white space with each book and in *Fat Charlie's circus* you're moving into using frames *inside* the illustration. Is there progression that you can see here, then, in your artwork?

Gay: No, because in my next book [*Willy Nilly*], there's not one frame! I've enclosed the text in straightforward boxes and all the illustrations are full-colour, double-page spreads that flow freely.

Davis: Do you think of colour as having important narrative implications (as in the predominance of blue in *Moonbeam on a cat's ear*)? Do you have favourite

colours for conveying certain emotions?

Gay: If you look at my books you can say *Moonbeam* is a blue book, *Rainy day magic* is a pink book, and not just because of the cover but the effect of it – it's a very cheery book – pinky and bluey and candylike. *Angel and the polar bear* is, of course, an aquatic book with the blues and greens and *Fat Charlie's circus* is a purple book. But when I sit down to draw, I really can't tell you what I'm going to use as colours. I really don't know.

Davis: And yet I can see patterns in the way you're using colour.

Gay: Yes, for certain moods the colour is just right and I see that after, but at the time I'm drawing it just flows. On my drawing table I have all my bottles of inks and my water colours and pastels and whatever junk there is there, and I'll just sit down when all I've got is a black line on a piece of paper. The whole drawing is there in black line that I've penned in, and then I'll say okay, let's see, and I start just like that. I don't really think about it. Now, the one book where it involved more thought because of the technical difficulties was *Fat Charlie's circus*: what I wanted was to have a different colour for every page of that book. I had thought of that in advance – I just wanted different skies all the time so what I had to do was in advance paint my boards yellow, pink, blue, whatever colour. For example, when he's doing the dishes it's all pink in the background, and I drew on top of that so all the skin had to be re-worked with the pink underlay. When it was a blue background it had to be re-worked to give the right tones. That is why this book has a very different colouring; every illustration has layers of colour.

Davis: The colouring has changed, but the shapes haven't. Your shapes happen to be primarily rounded and curved ones – the sort of shapes we associate with softness and yielding. (Even the frames in *Fat Charlie's circus* are rubbery.) Is this one of the reasons why your stories seem comforting and secure?

Gay: When someone uses the expression, "I can't even draw a straight line" they're describing me. I can't draw a straight line; it drives me crazy. So every object that I draw has a thickness, you see. I imagine every object as three-dimensional where the shoe is rounded and could almost be a little person. Everything is *plump* to me. I guess I just don't like straight lines and skinny things. It's not just the comfort and security, it's the texture too – but the texture as in the touching of things.

Davis: You want depth, but you want drawings that are soft too?

Gay: Yes, and that's my way of doing it. It's to show that softness with lines that are shaky and crooked and round and which just follow everything in an object.

Davis: There are also echoing patterns in the same shape family in your work. (For example, in *Moonbeam on a cat's ear*, the shape of the cat's ear appears in the butterfly wings, the tufts of hair, the shape of the billowy curtains.)

Gay: I think that's like a signature. If you look, for example, at some fine artists who do abstract paintings, you'll see there are signature gestures. And I

think those are mine in illustration. I can't end a curtain like this [drawing in the air a straight curtain]. It just comes out different for me!

Davis: So, it's not really deliberate.

Gay: Oh, I think it is. It's important that you have a feeling that the curtain *is* moving around, that's it's *being blown*, that it's *living* a bit.

Davis: What media do you use?

Gay: Watercolour, dyes, inks, pen and ink, pencil and coloured pencil, pastels. I sometimes do highlights with pastel. I use bleach to bleach out colours in my drawings, and to bleach out different layers of colours.

Davis: Do you like the definiteness of the line you can draw with pen and ink?

Gay: Yes, but in *Willy Nilly* I've used pencil line for a different effect: a scribbly, flowing, moving effect.

Davis: What about text placement in relation to art work. Do you try to create or disturb visual balance?

Gay: Where it's placed in the illustration is important because, once again, you're directing the eye. That's one thing I always talk about to my students [in illustration classes at L'Université de Québec a Montréal]: you're the one who's telling the people what to look at. So, the illustration will be constructed with the text placed somewhere where it will make you go directly to the action; so, if you've read something on one page, when you turn the page you have to have a visual sense to go with that reading. You're going from looking to reading, looking to reading all the time in a book. So you read and then, when you turn the page, you should automatically, *because of the illustrator*, be brought to a certain thing which echoes what has been written or continues what has been written. You can put the text at the top, bottom, or in the middle of a page – wherever – but it has to be somewhere where it's not forgotten because of the illustration. I'm just like a dictator you know: "You're gonna go look at this and then you'll go down and read this!"

Davis: But the *details* of the illustrations can take the reader off in other directions.

Gay: Yes, those are tangents. But they don't take you completely away from the main story.

Davis: There's also the way in which you use the line that sends the reader off in different directions – there is a horizontal base line but there's also a frenetic underlying diagonal line that jerks attention from one point to another. It takes you right to something and then seems to encourage you to make a U turn.

Gay: That's it. Then you *have* to look at the *whole* picture because your eye is taken *everywhere*.

Davis: Is that why you use the diagonal?

Gay: Oh, of course. I tend to use it really strongly sometimes – too strongly. So one of my most important tools in my studio is a mirror: every time I finish a drawing or a sketch I look at my work in a mirror and then I see if I've

gone too far. If everything is *really* weird in the mirror I say, okay, this is a bit too much and I start all over again. And it really works! You have been seeing it through the same eye all day as you worked on it – and all of a sudden you look at it and you see where the faults are right away.

Davis: So you don't end up producing a book that has to be tilted to be read?

Gay: No, it's not only that movement, that *penchant pour la diagonale* that I have. You realize that, because you have titled a lot of stuff too much, you've lost the point of your illustration.

Davis: I've noticed when you've got a diagonal tilt on one side of the spread you'll have a corresponding tilt going in the opposite direction on the other side. That kind of balances things out.

Gay: Certain illustrations are like that; others are not like that at all. Sometimes there'll just be one diagonal or a slash. Once again, I'm not carefully thinking this out, thinking, "Now let's see, how will I get the diagonal from A to B." I draw it, I have my gestures, my way of seeing things, and then I correct it if I see a real problem. So I try different things. Sometimes I do really bad things. With some illustrations in my books (which I won't mention!) I look at them and say, "That's one I shouldn't have done."

Davis: The viewpoint in your books is usually normal audience eye-level. It's not bird's eye or worm's eye. Does this reflect any particular kind of intellectual or emotional stance that you want your audience to take toward the subject matter?

Gay: Are you saying there are no bird's eye views?

Davis: There are a couple, but it's mostly eye level.

Gay: This is true in *Rainy day magic* and *Angel and the polar bear* but not in *Fat Charlie*. It's easier for kids to identify with the story and with the kids in the story than when you have the different views. For example, in *Rainy day magic* there's an exceptionally flat, straight-eyed view in the book. It's funny; when I was doing it I always had the impression of it being like those old movie things you used to crank where the paper with the images on it would go by. And I had the impression that the book is really fast and linear – wooosh – as if they were zooming through the story and just meeting things, meeting things, one after another. And I always had this music going through my head – da da da, da da da, what's going to happen next, what's going to happen next?

Davis: What about the musical energy of rhyming text? Some of the words are expressive rather than referential. That's obvious in *Lizzy's lion. Moonbeam on a cat's ear* has a slight rhyme, a hint of one. In *Rainy day magic* there's a definite ABCD rhyme scheme there, where the rhyming words carry the meaning. Is it more difficult to produce illustrations for rhyming text?

Gay: Well, in some ways because of the movement of rhyme. When I started doing the rhyming in *Rainy day magic* the illustrations were all sketched out, so I knew everything I was going to do. But, I knew that, of course, I would have some trouble with the rhymes because once you've done the illustrations

you can't change an elephant into a crocodile, you know, just because it doesn't rhyme anymore. The real problem was the actual rhythm of the book. I found it a bit contrived. As you can see, I didn't use rhyme in *Angel* and in *Fat Charlie*. I just found it hard to always work the movement of rhyme in with the illustrations. I really like very simple, natural texts where the dialogue sounds like how children talk really. That makes it more difficult than a rhyming book but it also makes for a different type of book. But that's okay, too, you know, because as a creator you have to try to see what happens with different sounds; you have to be open and listen.

Davis: Do you feel you have to create?

Gay: Oh yes. This year I'm taking what I would call a relaxation year. I can't take a sabbatical because I don't have a job anywhere, so no one is going to give me money for it. A relaxing year for me means that my two main projects will only be one book and one play but then there are other projects that will quickly fill up my "free" time: I still give conferences and workshops, and I do illustrations for textbooks for Nelson Canada, Ginn Publishing, Copp, Clark, and Pitman and MacMillan of New York. And I'm also still involved in designing clothes for children with Dominique Perron of *Ma Divine Clementine*. For about five years now I've been doing the illustrations – mostly animals and children – that are printed on the clothes, which could be anything from tiny, tiny things for infants to clothes for eight-year olds. I do a lot of wrap-around illustrations because I don't like the pictures just carefully placed on the front. I did a *huge* monster for one piece of clothing that went all the way around to the back! But I also have my personal work – making big foam sculptures of people and animals, enormous pieces that I carve out of hard foam (insulation material). Then I paint them in acrylic and varnish them. I do them just for fun. My most recent sculpture is a five-foot high naked woman flying through a hoop. There's a lot of work involved with the colours and all the details, so I might just do two a year. I just do them and hang them up; there's no pressure to get them done for a certain deadline which is great. Maybe one day I'll have enough to do a show – maybe when they start taking over the house, I'll have to do something with them.

So this year I'm trying to be relaxed and to *like* the free time I have. But I just don't know what to do when I'm not doing my work. I say, "Okay, now I can take an afternoon off." And what do I do? I sit down and draw or I sit down and write. This is relaxation! It's like a compulsive need. I'm just so caught up in the world I can create. I'm just so caught up in creating.

Books by Marie-Louise Gay

Willy Nilly. Stoddart, 1990. (Will also be published in Québec [in French], Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Australia, and the U.S.A.)

Fat Charlie's circus. Stoddart, 1989. (Also published in Québec [in French], Denmark, and Norway.)

Angel and the polar bear. Stoddart, 1988. (Also published in Québec and Great Britain.)

Rainy day magic. Stoddart, 1987. (Also published in Québec, Great Britain, U.S.A. and Denmark.)

Moonbeam on a cat's ear. Stoddart, 1986. (Also published in Québec, U.S.A., and Great Britain.)

Voyage au clair de lune. Héritage, 1986. (Translation of *Moonbeam on a cat's ear.*)

The garden. Lorimer, 1985.

Lizzy's lion. By Dennis Lee. Illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart, 1984.
  Blanc comme neige. Ovale, 1984.

Un léopard dans mon placard. Ovale, 1984.

Rond comme ton visage. Ovale, 1984.

Petit et grand. Ovale, 1984.

La soeur de Robert. La Courte échelle, 1983.

De zéro à minuit. La Courte échelle, 1981.

Awards Received by Marie-Louise Gay

1988 Governor General's Award for *Rainy day magic*; Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award for *Rainy day magic*
1987 Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award for *Moonbeam on a cat's ear*
1985 Canada Council Children's Literature Prize for illustration of an English language book for *Lizzy's lion*; Canada Council Children's Literature Prize for a French language children's book for the series entitled Drole d'école (which includes *Blanc comme neige*, *Rond comme ton visage*, *Petit et grand*, and *Un léopard dans mon placard*)

1984 Alvine Belisle Award
1983 Toronto Art Directors Club Merit Award
1979 Society Illustration L.A. Award
1978 Western Art Directors Club Award, San Francisco
1972 Claude Neon National Billboard Award

Marie Davis *teaches critical theory and eighteenth-century literature at The University of Western Ontario.*