Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

A MATTER OF THRESHOLDS

Very last first time. Jan Andrews. Illus. Ian Wallace. Douglas & McIntyre, 1985. Unpag., cloth $12.95 ISBN 0-88899-043-X; **Night cars**. Teddy Jam. Illus. Eric Beddows. Douglas & McIntyre, 1988. 32 pp., $13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-058-8; **Morgan the magnificent**. Ian Wallace. Illus. author. Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. 32 pp., $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-056-1; **Architect of the moon**. Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Ian Wallace. Douglas & McIntyre, 1988. 32 pp., $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-073-1; **Zoom at sea**. Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Ken Nutt. Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. Unpag., $9.95 $4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88899-021-9, 0-88899-106-1; **Zoom away**. Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Ken Nutt. Douglas & McIntyre, 1985. Unpag., $9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-042-4.

In his memorable article, "An eye for thresholds," (*CCL*, 42, 1987) Tim Wynne-Jones writes:

> The real world does not readily reveal its patterns. Fiction, the shape of fiction with its literal Thresholds, trains the mind to recognize life's invisible truths and thus lends form to the chaos of living. . . . It would seem to be advisable to create picture books for children which ring the bell loudly, that the child, grown-up, might hear the echo down through his life and stop and look around and step forward with courage and cognizance across otherwise invisible thresholds into discovery. (54)

Although children's books should provide a sense of sanctuary and security, it is equally important that they also offer encounters with what Wynne-Jones calls "Thresholds": those risk-filled but unavoidable passages from one state of being to another. The importance of learning to step through "Thresholds into discovery" is acknowledged, not only in the picture books containing Wynne-Jones' texts, but in most of the books included in this review. Although all of these works are extraordinarily good, the best of them are distinguished by an eloquent evocation of the courage and determination with which the child confronts and steps through his or her individual threshold. The excellence of these books lies in their capacity to do justice, by means of both picture and word, to the profundity and complexity of the child's experience.

In *Zoom at sea* and *Zoom away*, Tim Wynne-Jones' text and Ken Nutt's rich black and white illustrations conjure up worlds permeated with thresholds. *Zoom at sea* introduces us to Zoom, a small white cat who loves water. Zoom embarks on a quest for the Sea, and the first stage of his journey

brings him to a major threshold: the "big front door" of the mysterious Maria's house. Wynne-Jones identifies this door and "the little door signposted 'The Northwest Passage'" in *Zoom away* as significant doorways of his "own devising" ("An eye for thresholds," 51). Nutt's illustration of the massive, shuttered house standing in the empty street intensifies the momentous nature of the step little Zoom is about to take (see figure 1). The peeling posters give Maria's street a slightly disreputable air, a quality which suggests that, under his innocent white exterior, Zoom may be experiencing more complex desires than a literal quest for the Sea. Michele Landsberg (referring to reviewer Sandra Martin's insights) acknowledges that Maria may be identified as a prostitute figure but prefers to see her as a "richly evocative maternal figure" (*Michele Landsberg's guide to children's books*, 1986, 27). However, Maria is far more ambivalent than the comforting mother Landsberg makes of her. In one of the most significant picture/text combinations in *Zoom at sea*, Maria turns an enormous wheel, causing the floor "to rumble" and machinery to "whirr and hum". This is an earth-shaking moment which is wonderfully translated in Nutt's illustration (see figure 2). As massive as the architectural structures around her, Maria grasps the wheel, lifting her powerful arms and, at the same moment, raising a strong, voluptuous leg clad in a seductive, striped stocking. This Maria is not just a mother. She is also a potent and provocative unleasher of change. In the next illustration, water rushes into the room from open doors, transforming the interior space into another world: the world of the Sea Zoom has been searching for. Here, again, is a highly complex image suggestive of birth and new life, as well as more mature, sexual satisfactions. Maria thus functions as an ambivalent figure. Exuding an air of power at once maternal and sexual, Maria is a custodian who instigates change, particularly the potential change from innocence to

Fig. 1

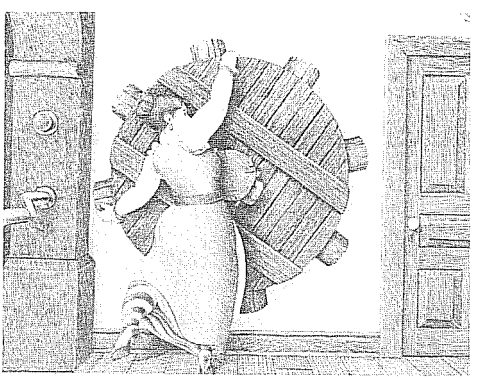
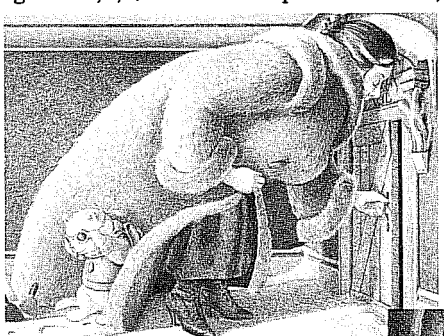
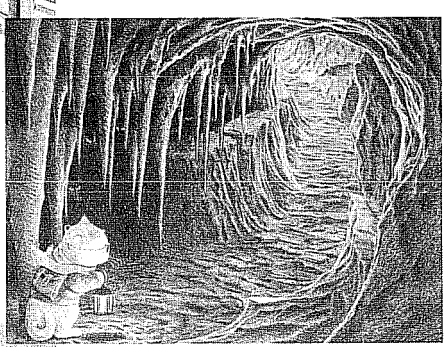


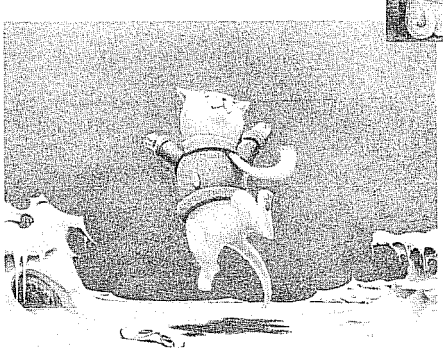
Fig. 2

sophistication which she, herself, embodies.

In *Zoom away*, Maria's double role is even more compellingly expressed. In this book, she asks Zoom to help her search for his uncle, Captain Roy, in the "High Arctic." As in *Zoom at sea*, Maria's house is the site of transformation. But, in this case, it is a movement, not to a summer world of sea and sand, but to a more forbidding world of ice and snow. Zoom and Maria come upon a door labelled "NORTH WEST PASSAGE." Because it is too small for her, Maria must leave Zoom to negotiate this threshold by himself. Wynne-Jones credits Nutt with the insight that Zoom "has to do it alone" ("An eye for thresholds" 53). Significantly, it is Maria who opens the door, beyond which lies "a very dark and very cold" tunnel. Zoom bravely steps in, sees "a light up ahead" and emerges triumphant into the "bright sun" of the arctic. This journey through danger into triumph is accompanied by three extraordinary illustrations. (see figures 3,4,5). As Maria opens the door, Zoom shelters for a moment in the







Figs. 3, 4 and 5

folds of her furry coat as he puts on his goggles. The monumental Maria is placed between Zoom and the door she is opening, at once sheltering him and exposing the threshold he must cross. As the door opens, Maria's coat also opens. The suggestiveness of this juxtaposition is continued in the next illustration where Zoom enters an unmistakably vaginal passage, dangerously studded with sharp stalacites behind which lurk predatory eyes. Finally we see Zoom leaping high in the light of the arctic sun. Zoom has crossed a threshold. He is, for an ecstatic moment, liberated. As in his encounter with the pouring, tumbling water in *Zoom at sea*, Zoom's exultation in the "High Arctic" is expressed with satisfying ambivalence. It is a complex instant: at once a birth and a movement away from childhood innocence towards greater autonomy and, perhaps, sexual sophistication.

The Zoom books are composed of wonderful, multi-layered mixtures of image and text that masterfully combine a comforting sense of security with an equally compelling evocation of less innocent sensual gratification. Certainly I am not suggesting that children must necessarily respond directly to the erotic implications in these works. However, growing up involves sexual knowledge, and it is to the credit of Wynne-Jones and Nutt that they allow this element to enter, perhaps as a threshold which the "child grown up" may recognize. These remarkable works, with their subtle but potent inclusion of erotic experience, bear eloquent witness to the complex levels of realization which all of us must undergo before we reach that stage we label "adult." *Zoom at sea* is the winner of the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Illustrators Award, the Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award and the IODE Book Award. *Zoom away* also won the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Illustrator's Award.

Architect of the moon, also written by Wynne-Jones, owes much to Ian Wallace's fine illustrations. It is a subtle work which, like all picture books must be thoroughly *looked at* before one can appreciate what it has to offer. A story about young David Finebloom, a "brave block builder" who rescues the disappearing moon by rebuilding it with his toy blocks, this work is also about thresholds. In particular, it deals with boundaries which threaten to become stifling enclosures. Wynne-Jones tells of leaving architecture school because "to be an architect was to put up walls, to disconnect spaces one from the other, to remove the possibility of getting from here to there" ("An eye for thresholds," 43). In *Architect of the moon*, Wynne-Jones and Wallace allow us to get "from here to there" despite the walls, enclosures and rigid geometric shapes which abound in this book. Here the ordered world is invaded by something extraordinary: a message from the moon. In Wallace's illustration, the message ("HELP! I'M FALLING APART. YOURS, THE MOON.") appears in the form of illuminated letters thrust through a window blown open by a gust of wind. Suddenly, a threshold appears: an opening in the enclosed box that is David's room. David, grasping this opportunity, packs his blocks and launches himself into space. From this point, Wallace's illustrations superbly render the im-

possible possible. His glowing, pastel images create a playground in space where shape, space and size become entirely malleable. Depending on the perspective of the drawing, shapes and figures can be huge or tiny, near or far. In such a place, David, a little boy with his little toys, has the power to rebuild something as monumental as the moon, even if the job he does is "a little rough in places." David must return to his ordered world, eerily portrayed by Wallace as a desolate landscape where David's blocks become identical but ominously separate square houses (see figure 6). Yet, we are also left with a final, hopeful image. Although it is enclosed within a window frame, David's magical work, a fully rounded moon, glows vividly in the night sky. Without denying the frighteningly empty and restricting omnipresence of a certain kind of "normality," Wynne-Jones and Wallace create a threshold to a "there" not defined by barriers. Moreover, it is a "there" that the child has taken a hand in creating. As in the Zoom books, what is offered is an essential opening: something that does not enclose but encourages the child to take a decisive step towards change.

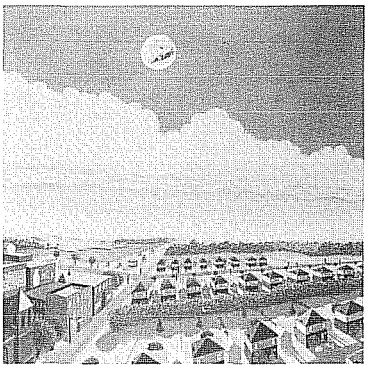


Fig. 6

Very last first time, written by Jan Andrews and illustrated by Ian Wallace, beautifully expresses this business of passing from one state of being to another. As the wonderfully paradoxical title suggests, this is a work about an experience which is both an end and a beginning. Eva Padlyat, an Inuit girl, goes under the frozen sea to collect mussels, a traditional activity in her village. However, this time, "for the very first time in her life Eva would walk on the bottom of the sea alone." Here the "vast northern tundra" is the threatening setting for transition. Andrews describes the

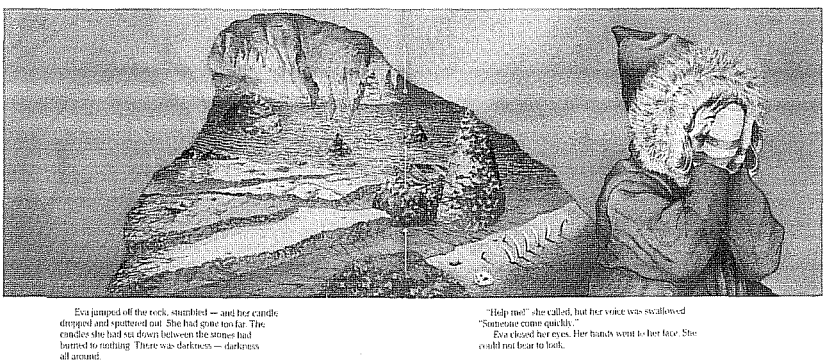


Fig. 7

landscape as desolate and snow-bound, but Wallace counters this whiteness with the colour of his images. In these literally brilliant pictures, the "frozen tundra" is imbued with a shimmering richness of light and colour. Visually, Wallace adds an element of vivid life to the dangerous, death-like undertones of Eva's solitary walk.

After dropping through a hole she and her mother have cut into the ice, Eva sees, in the light of her candle, a shadowy sea floor haunted by spirit shapes. Quickly filling her mussel pan, Eva explores this mysterious underworld but goes "too far." Her candles burn "to nothing," and she is left to find her way through complete darkness – with the added threat of an encroaching tide. Wallace's illustration of Eva's solitary moment of terror shares the formidable symbolism of the tunnel in *Zoom away* (see figure 7). Here, again, is a dark, vaginal passage spiked with fearful, tooth-like shapes. But, like Zoom, Eva finds a light and locates the opening in the ice where she dances happily in the light of the moon. This moment is accompanied by an inspired illustration (see figure 8). Watched by the spirit shapes, Eva is transformed by the moonlight

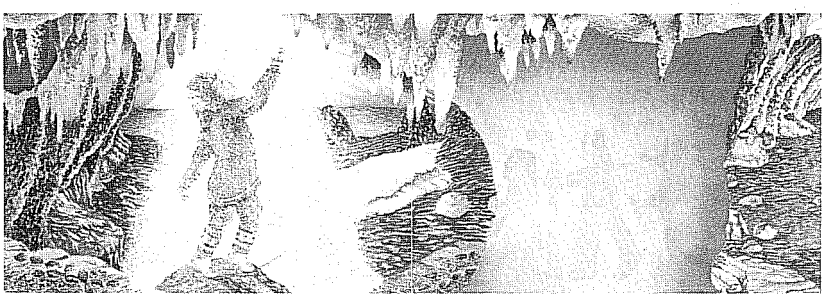


Fig. 8

into an ecstatic, iridescent creature in the throes of metamorphosis. When her mother pulls her out of the ice, Eva announces: "That was my very *last* first time – for walking alone at the bottom of the sea." This transformation is confirmed when we see Eva for the last time, eating a plate of mussels, her head surrounded by a halo of northern lights. She has earned both the light and the meal, symbolic of her new-found self-knowledge and self-sufficiency; for she has harvested both at the cost of a profound and fearful experience. *Very last first time* is, quite simply, a superb and moving picture book. It is a mystery to me that there is no gold medal on its cover. There should be.

Morgan the magnificent, written and illustrated by Ian Wallace, is, like *Very last first time*, an excellent, meticulously designed picture book. Morgan, a young girl who lives on her father's farm, dreams of becoming a "daring high-wire artist" like the "Amazing Anastasia" whom she idolizes. Wallace's half-title, illustrated with appropriately circus-like flamboyance, introduces us to Morgan. Enclosed in a cameo image, Morgan, barefoot and dressed in overalls, balances on a picket fence. Around her, Wallace has arrayed the gilt emblems

of her dream world. Particularly important is the ambiguous female figure who appears as a twin image on either side of Morgan. This full-breasted, winged figure (like Anastasia, an emblem of Morgan's dream self) appears in the left-hand corner of each illustration, reacting to and sympathizing with Morgan's experiences. With her wings and ripe breasts, this complex symbol embodies both innocence and maturity, fantasy and reality: states which Morgan, herself, must come to terms with.

Each morning, Morgan practises balancing on the roof of the barn. On her "one hundred and sixty-sixth walk," Morgan's father catches her at it and forbids her to continue. In Wallace's illustration, the father, holding a threatening pitchfork, stands in the doorway of the barn while Morgan pleads before him, her arms outstretched like the wings of her female emblem. Visually, Wallace suggests that, although the father's reaction may stem from an understandable fear for Morgan's safety, he is denying her access to an essential threshold. Morgan, though, is determined to prove herself. She goes to the circus grounds, enters Anastasia's tent, puts on Anastasia's costume and "a pair of fine leather shoes." Seeing herself in a mirror as a "beautiful high wire artist," Morgan decides to perform in place of Anastasia. At first all goes well; but Morgan is not used to the thin wire and begins to lose her balance. Wallace's illustration of this moment is the star act of his own book. In it he captures, not only the vertigo and terror of Morgan's experience, but also its poignancy (see figure 9). Dressed in Anastasia's grown-up costume, with her little girl's undershirt peeping out at the bustline, Morgan is revealed as a child uncertainly and fearfully poised on the edge of adulthood. Luckily, Anastasia herself arrives to help Morgan. Regaining confidence, Morgan finishes her walk along the high wire to the other platform where Anastasia waits with open arms. Morgan has completed her dangerous crossing. The last picture we see of her leaves us in little doubt that she has crossed a threshold. Surrounded by the same emblems Wallace uses on the half-title page, we see Morgan doing a handstand in front of the departing circus wagons while (as the text tells us) her father applauds loudly. Here the secure "reality" of the father's farm world is happily mingled with Morgan's own dream world. As evidence

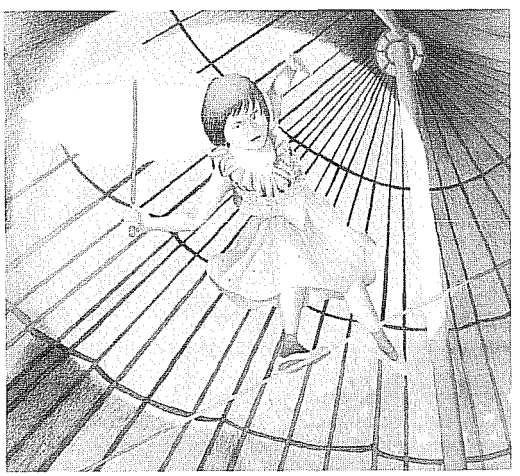


Fig. 9

of this transformation, Morgan is no longer the barefoot child she was at the beginning of the story. Proudly displayed in her signficantly topsy-turvy pose are the fine leather shoes she has taken such risks to earn.

Meant for a younger audience than *Very last first time* and *Morgan the magnificent*, *Night cars* by Teddy Jam and Eric Beddows (Ken Nutt) is a poem, in pictures and words, about a baby "Who wouldn't go to sleep." Accompanying these opening words is an image of a father holding his young child, both figures firmly enclosed within a window frame. A second picture shows us the baby's intensely eager face, lit with the light beaming in from the outside world. Next, we zoom in to a foot-level view of the evening activity on the sidewalk: "Tired voices/Walking feet/Passing cars/Noisy street." Then the focus pulls back and we see the streetscape from above. This is the child's perspective, and the baby appears on the periphery of these distanced images, able to look on at the street scenes, but also safely locked out. In a wonderful night picture, the child leans on the bottom edge of the illustration, looking with vivid interest at a dark, forbidden world that is visible yet inaccesible (see figure 10). At the end of the book, baby and father enter the morning street and go into the Donut Café. The child finally falls asleep, safe in its father's arms, both figures once again enclosed in a window frame.

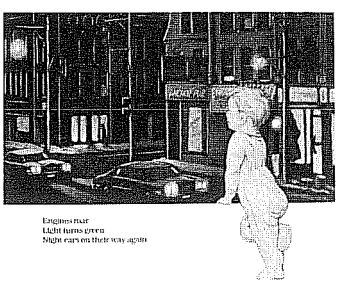


Fig. 10

Night cars is a visual *tour de force*. Full of magnificent effects, it exudes a mixture of excitement and reassurance. The urban world it presents is enticing but never threatening to the child who is always securely protected from danger. However, I feel that *Night cars*, in some ways, offers rather too much protection. The Zoom books, also suitable for very young children, resonate with layers of meaning, both threatening and comforting. I feel that *Night cars* lacks this essential complexity, despite Beddows' masterful handling of visual effects. The urban setting has been softened and idealized. The buildings and the friendly, rounded figures on the street are represented in a style reminiscent of an earlier, less threatening period. It is a city scene without the hard edges of today's urban society. In a telling detail, Beddows has drawn a storefront advertising "ENDLESS AMUSEMENTS." Perhaps a video arcade, this store is boarded up, implying that the contemporary world, with its mechanized amusements, can be denied in favour of a less frightening, more humane facade. It is this overly safe, almost stifling effect which is, I think, *Night cars*' weakness. The baby, continuously kept at a distance and protected from threat, is also denied significant experience. Unlike all the other books I have discussed, *Night cars* offers no challenging doorway, no moment of change that might give the child

a taste of its own powers. *Night cars* is, probably deliberately, a thoroughly soothing picture book. But, despite the obvious talent of its creators, I think the work lacks depth, primarily because it fails to provide that threshold which the child, now or later, may recognize and step through "with courage and cognizance."

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CANADIAN NATURE PORTRAITS

The wildlife ABC: A nature alphabet. Jan Thornhill. Illus. Jan Thornhill. Greey de Pencier Books, 1988. 32 pp., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920775-29-2; **The story of Chakapas**. Annie Downes Catterson, ed. Penumbra Press, 1987. 32 pp., $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920806-91-0; **The blue raven**. Ted Harrison. Illus. author. Macmillan of Canada, 1989. 32 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-7715-9288-4; **Journey to the top of the world**. Janet Foster. Greey de Pencier Books, 1987. $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-920775-17-9.

Four recently-published children's books compellingly portray the beauty of the Canadian landscape and the living things found within its borders. Although different in format and design, the books all reflect an appreciation for the diversity of Canada's environment and of the people, plants and animals which inhabit it.

For the very young, *The wildlife ABC: A nature alphabet*, written and illustrated by Jan Thornhill, introduces children to a multitude of animals found in Canadian woods, fields, streams, cities and tundra. The rhyming text is certain to please young readers, while the beautifully drawn, realistic illustrations not only depict the animals representing each alphabet letter, but also include a wealth of detail to teach the reader about the habitat and behaviour of each animal portrayed. Representing the letter V, for example, is the text

V is for Vole
Who had better beware!

The accompanying illustration shows a vole in the foreground near a barbed-wire fence, with farm buildings and the rolling hills of the prairies behind. This winter scene includes dried grasses and weeds sticking up through the snow fence showing above the snowdrifts. In the background are two of the vole's natural enemies, the fox and the hawk, as well as a hare which shares the vole's habitat. Ms. Thornhill has even painted the vole's footprints and tail mark on the snow. In some illustrations, such as those of the frog, housefly and raccoon, Ms. Thornhill demonstrates the animals' relationship to the human world. Be-