

MINI-REVIEWS

The hour of the Frog. Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Catharine O'Neill. Douglas & McIntyre, 1989. [A Groundwood Book] 32 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-096-0.

In this recent fantasy by Tim Wynne-Jones and Catharine O'Neill, a little girl awakes just before midnight to witness the nocturnal visit of the Frog, who dances a soft shoe in the hall, then proceeds to wreak havoc in the kitchen, composing his version of a Dagwood sandwich: "Eggs and mayo, peanut butter, onions and Flies! On a sticky bun." Frightened by the sounds of the Frog's slow ascent towards her bedroom ("Thlump. Slurp. Bump. He's heading my way. I pull the covers up over my head"), the girl scares him away, only to go to bed hungry, with visions of breakfast – "French toast and butter. . .Zzz. . .Maple syrup. . . and. . . Flies!"

Unlike much recent children's verse, which is prose masquerading as poetry, this is a poem disguised as prose. There is assonance (the word "thlump" captures not just the sound of the Frog's hop, but also the creature's sliminess) and a fine sense of rhythm:

"Oh, woe?" says he.
"Ho, ho," says he.
"You don't scare me."

The disorder that the Frog represents is brilliantly conveyed in Catharine O'Neill's animated watercolours. Her shaky black outlines, varied page formats, and convoluted perspectives – a foreshortened frog diving headlong at the reader, against the background of a reversed staircase – underscore the midnight chaos.

Simon and the wind. Gilles Tibo. Tundra, 1989, 24 pp., \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-234-4.

It is the pictures that count in *Simon and the wind*. The story alone is somewhat trite: Simon, who loves the wind, yearns to fly in it like bubbles, birds or clouds. In the end, he accepts that at least he and his friends can *make* things fly in it – specifically, kites.

The real story of *Simon and the wind* lies in the pictures, where Tibo animates the inanimate. Most striking are the surreal trees, with broad, flattened trunks and crowns resembling heads of blowing hair. In Tibo's universe, the inanimate often takes on life, while the animate (ducks, loons, geese) look toy-like. In fact, Simon's scarecrow is easily as lifelike as Simon!

Tibo's flawless airbrush technique produces extremely subtle gradations of tone. My only quibble is with Simon himself. His Cabbage Patch Doll face, with its circular mouth or occasional "happy face" expression, is a bit treacly. I prefer the more distinctive face of that scarecrow!

Cat and Mom story. Shirley Lalonde. Illus. Lindsay Grater. Scholastic-TAB, 32 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-73130-0.

It is not usually Scholastic one turns to for exceptional book design, but *Cat and Mom story* shows that someone up there has an eye for quality. The story is fairly standard: Martha wants a cat, Mom refuses, and as Martha's requests accelerate, so do Mom's reasons for denying them. But Lindsay Grater's illustrations rescue the tale from banality. Her tidy little watercolours with their neat pencil outlines recall Ann Blades' work, though they are less flattened and naïve. Within this traditional framework, Grater is not afraid of unusual perspectives. A large, white kitten may occupy an entire foreground, with only the bottom half of a door and Mom's legs at a computer desk visible in the background. On each page, amusing borders of miniatures comment on the larger picture (macaroni on the kitchen page, cats' eyes marbles framing a full-page frisky kitten, even computer keys). The endpapers offer a deft final touch: cats' footprints heading upwards in the front, in reverse at the close.

Midnight visit at Molly's house. Jirina Marton. Annick Press, 1988. 24 pp., \$12.95 \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-920303-99-44, 0-920303-98-6.

Ever since the "whole language" gurus of early education discovered that predictable books help preschoolers learn to read, picture books with repeatable refrains have been appearing with increased frequency. But not every refrain is as memorable as Joseph Jacobs' "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold" or Robert Munsch's "Clang, clang, rattle-bing-bang." Some are downright dull.

Jirina Marton's *Midnight visit at Molly's house* provides a case in point. One night, the moon decides to visit Molly's house, proceeding through the garden, over the sill into Molly's room, hastening from room to room because "time was short and it wanted to explore the whole house, so it hurried on" – a sentence repeated on four successive pages. As I read the book aloud to my five-year-old, I found myself dreading that line! To be fun to repeat for parent and child, a refrain needs rhythm and assonance.

If the text of *Midnight visit* isn't magical, the pictures are, superbly conveying the enchantment of a midsummer night. There is more than a touch of Chagall in Jirina Marton's perspectives, delightfully askew, with doorways narrower at top than at bottom, and planes tilted. The texture and whiteness

of the canvas surface through the paint, infusing the rooms with the white glow of moonlight. It is a pity this fine painter is less a magician with words than with pictures.

Home for Christmas. Deirdre Kessler. Illus. P. John Burden. Pottersfield Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-919001-57-2.

Home for Christmas is a picture book that should be a novel. In fact, its plot in many ways parallels that of Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*. Ella, an orphan living with her unpleasant Aunt Ada in nineteenth-century Boston, runs away to P.E.I. in search of her Acadian Grandma Gallant. Armed only with a half-legible return address on a letter and a few basic tools she has managed to assemble, Ella sets out one autumn day disguised as a boy, determined to reach her aunt in time for Christmas. It is, of course, the journey that promises the reader some adventures. Instead, the trip is covered in four brief paragraphs, with only a few asides ("Some nights Ella knocked on a farmhouse door and asked if she could do barn work") to indicate that Ella's trip was arduous. Even the happy resolution is the product not of internal momentum (Ella's resourcefulness or pluck), but of authorial contrivance; Grandma Gallant happens upon a despondent Ella on a roadside stump.

P. John Burden's often comical black-ink drawings enliven the narration, though the murky backgrounds sometimes suggest a gloom unwarranted by the text, and the draughtsmanship is occasionally flawed (note Ella's distorted torso in her run for the ferry).

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MINI-COMPTES RENDUS

Bonne nuit, Caillou. Micheline Chartrand. Illus. Hélène Desputeaux. Montréal, Chouette, 1990. non paginé, relié. ISBN 2-9800909-9-9.

Il existe quatre livres cartonnés dans cette collection pour très jeunes enfants, mettant en vedette le petit Caillou. Il est difficile d'être terriblement original dans la conception de tels livres-objets. Mais cette série des Caillou est excellente en tous points, rehaussée encore ici par la subtilité et l'ironie des illustrations d'Hélène Desputeaux. Tout consiste à cacher dans l'image des anomalies qu'on découvre petit à petit et qui finissent par se normaliser dans