When a Poetry Book is Not a Book of Poetry

—Lissa Paul

Davies, Gillian B. *Robertson Rat*. Ill. Grant Leier. Victoria: Cherubim, 2004. 32 pp. $24.95 hc. ISBN 1-894800-53-5.

Fitch, Sheree. *Pocket Rocks*. Ill. Helen Flook. Victoria: Orca, 2004. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55143-289-7.

Hacking, Norm. *When Cats Go Wrong*. Ill. Cynthia Nugent. Vancouver: Raincoast, 2004. N. pag. $24.95 hc. ISBN 1-55192-729-2.

Heidbreder, Robert. *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance*. Ill. Bill Slaven and Esperança Melo. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. 32 pp. $17.95 ISBN 1-55337-393-6.

Heras, Theo. *What Will We Do with the Baby-o?* Ill. Jennifer Herbert. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. 32 pp. $18.99 ISBN 0-88776-689-7.

Johnson, Gillian. *Gracie's Baby Chub Chop*. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. 32 pp. $19.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-693-5.

Lawson, JonArno. *The Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask*. Ill. Sherwin Tjia. Toronto: Pedlar, 2004. 88 pp. $25.00 hc. ISBN 0-9732140-9-0.

Lee, Dennis. *So Cool*. Ill. Maryann Kovalski. Toronto: Key Porter, 2004. 80 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55263-613-5.

Lesynski, Loris. *Zoems for Zindergarten*. Toronto : Annick, 2004. 32 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55037-875-9.

Eight out of nine. That's good. Of the nine books described as "books of poetry" sent to me by *CCL/LCJ* for review, I had something good to say about eight of them: something good about the design, the music, the literariness of the language. As a reviewer, I greeted my smilingly positive initial responses with a measure of relief (it's better to have good things to say than bad ones). There's a but. Only two of the books in the box of nine, JonArno Lawson's *Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask* and Dennis Lee's *So Cool*,

qualify as collections of original, mostly lyric verse by gifted poets who write eloquently for both adults and children. If you want to read only about these two books, skip to the end of this essay, because otherwise I'm keeping to the countdown model and so saving the best to the last. The other books are best defined as songs or picture books. Briefly, the categorization of the other books breaks down like this. Both *What Will We Do with the Baby-o?* (nursery verses with musical accompaniments) and *When Cats Go Wrong* (original words and music) are song books—though both are illustrated. *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance*, *Gracie's Baby Chub Chop*, *Robertson Rat*, and *Pocket Rocks* are all picture books. The quality of the poetry ranges across varying degrees of rhyming text, metrically competent prose and original imagery. There are elements of poetry in most of the books, but not enough to qualify them as books of poetry. That covers eight of the nine books under review. The only book I don't like is *Zig Zag*. The subtitle, *Zoems for Zindergarten*, suggests the problem: it's too cute and too clearly targeted to the kindergarten reading-readiness market. Besides instructing children (relentlessly) on what zigzag means, there are rules of kindergarten behaviour rendered in really awful verse: "not on your elbows/ not on your knees/ sit on your bottom/ please please please." Now that I've set the categorical terms of my review, I'm going to move backwards through the list: from songs, to picture books, to the two books in which two very fine Canadian poets demonstrate the range, originality, and eloquence of their gifts.

There are elements of poetry in most of the books, but not enough to qualify them as books of poetry.

Songs

In contrast to the pedantic *Zig Zag*—though also marketed for young children—is *What Will We Do with the Baby-o?*, a collection mostly containing traditional verses selected by Theo Heras—though there are a few authored songs, including the title "What Will We Do With the Baby-O" by Ron Glazer and "Jig Along Home" by Woody Guthrie. It's an intelligent selection, drawn from Heras's long experience conducting library programs and workshops for parents and their infants. These are, for the most part, songs "worn smooth by tongues long silent" (to adapt a phrase Joseph Campbell applies to fairy tales), and they've soothed and pleased infants and their parents for generations. The newer songs, though composed, are on their way to entering oral tradition, much in the same way that "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" by Jane Taylor in the early nineteenth century has done. Although the body of nursery verse is huge, each

new generation of parents needs a new selection of verses for their new children, a selection immediately usable, singable, and in tune with the temper of their own times and places. That's where the skill of the anthologist comes in. In *What Will We Do with the Baby-o?*, Theo Heras emphasizes poems to play with, dandling songs, and riddle poems which offer deep linguistic pleasure. Nursery verses learned in infancy provide the "verbal music," as Seamus Heaney says in "Feeling into Words," for children to take with them throughout their lives (45). The soft and subtle riddle poem—"I gave my love a cherry that had no stone. / I gave my love a chicken that had no bone"—never fails to haunt. "Trot Trot to Boston" includes the instruction to "Bounce baby on your lap." Here's my critical problem. I like the book—and recognize that new parents need new collections of nursery verse. But that's not the same as creating a poetry book. I like Heras's book and think it a good example of its kind (a selection of nursery verse), but it is not in the same genre as the books by Lawson and Lee, that is, it's not an original book of verse by an accomplished poet.

Apropos the problem of when a song is not a book of poetry, Norm Hacking's *When Cats Go Wrong* has a little explanatory verse on the front endpaper of the picture book: "This song is a book, / This book is a song, / That tells the true tale / Of when Cats Go Wrong." The endpaper itself is beautifully designed, a deep red, with a black cat in silhouette toying with a mouse on a string entering onto the page. The CD included with the book is wonderfully listenable. It's a catchy dark, tango-ish tune sung by Norm Hacking, featuring (as the helpful endnotes explain) the "bondoneon," a kind of concertina, described as "the most prominent musical instrument in the tango orchestra." The tragicomic mournfulness of the song reminded me of the settings used by Tiger Lilies, in a performance of the "junk" opera of S*hockheaded Peter*. *When Cats Go Wrong* was played on Stuart Maclean's *The Vinyl Café* on CBC radio and so reached a wide crossover audience.

Hacking describes *When Cats Go Wrong* as a tribute to the "tangomania" of Paris in the early 1900s, when, as he says in the endnotes, "Paris was bubbling with artistic activity of all kinds," and poster art "was done in a bright and bold style." The pictures accompanying the song text have exactly that serious, painterly retro feel, and, in case readers can't work it out themselves, the tribute to Toulouse Lautrec is made explicit. The combination of modern and retro is very attractive. I found myself listening to the track compulsively, which is a good sign. It's a catchy lyric, a catchy tune: "Life with a naughty kitty / Isn't very pretty. / So I sing this mournful song / About when cats go wrong." I've been singing it to myself at odd, abstracted moments. It's good and it sticks. *When Cats Go Wrong* is a welcome addition to the honourable ranks of poetic cats, some of

whom have musical credentials: Christopher Smart's "My Cat Jeoffrey," T. S. Eliot's *Book of Practical Cats*, of course (with the music by Andrew Lloyd Webber), *The Cat Came Back* sung by Fred Penner, and the naughty kitties in Roger McGough's *Bad, Bad Cats*. Despite the fact that Hacking's *When Cats Go Wrong* is singable and memorable, one song isn't enough to qualify as a book of poetry, so it still falls short—which is, of course, also one of the limiting factors associated with any thirty-two page picture book. One poem (even a good one) does not make a book of poetry.

Picture Books

Though *Gracie's Baby Chub Chop* and *Pocket Rocks* are both good picture books (well-designed, with an intelligent counterpoint between picture and text), they are not books of poetry. They contain poetic elements, arresting images, and have been composed by metrically sensitive poets, but both texts seem more accurately classified as picture books with verse texts.

Gillian Johnson's *Gracie's Baby Chub Chop* follows on nicely from Norm Hacking's song. This time, instead of a naughty cat getting into mischief, the mischief-maker is a toddler who has been left with a family while its parents take a trip they've just won. The joy in the verse is in the domestic specificity, in the accumulation of items:

> The brushes, the leashes, Mother's flippers,
> Fabio's kibbles and Gracie's kippers.
> The teddy, the pillow, and Fabio's rug,
> A china plate, a christening mug.

Fabio and Gracie are dogs and the reason the mayhem occurs is that the parent in charge, the father, is not paying attention:

> Throughout the baby's busy caper,
> Father sat and read the paper.
>
> When he looked up, the tot was asleep.
> He put him down without a peep.

Johnson is an accomplished writer—and she's married to the very fine British author, Nicholas Shakespeare. They have two children of their own and the narrative has the ring of authentic domestic life—despite the exaggerated naughtiness. It's a good one-off narrative of a single event, in the tradition of say, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. It's good of its kind. But when I compare it to the metrical variety and inventiveness of Lee and Lawson, it recedes into the category of picture book rather than book of poetry.

Sheree Fitch is a well-known Canadian poet and *Pocket Rocks* works because Fitch too attends to the intimate, precisely-realized detail of child's play. As

a poet, Fitch writes prose sentences with perfectly graceful rhythms. And she has a poet's knack for figurative language. So the hair of the rock-collecting boy in the story, Ian Goobi, is "soft as dandelion fuzz or a whisper." A visitor who comes to class is described as "an upside down capital T"—which is a brilliant description of a tall thin man with big feet. When Ian discovers a rock, he does a rock-song riff. It's a "Jungle Rock" and he starts to sing: "Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye rock." The illustrations of elongated characters in jungles of purple and green suggest what used to be called a psychedelic or even acid-rock landscape. It's a lovely book, fully in the league with Fitch's other books for children—from her first book, *Toes in My Nose* through *There were Monkeys in My Kitchen* and *Mable Murple*. Again, a great picture book, with good verse in it—but when compared with Lee or Lawson, it is best classified as a picture book in verse. The verse doesn't stand alone, that is, without the pictures.

The last two picture books I'm considering in this section—*Robertson Rat* and *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance*—are also nice in a glossy way, but that's due to the pictures. Because they are not written by poets, they lack poetry despite the rhymes and rhythmic texts. The cover blurb explains that Gillian Davies wrote *Robertson Rat* with the aim of inspiring "young readers to overcome fear and try new things." I saw no evidence, despite the fact that "Robertson, Robertson, Robertson Rat," apparently "dabbles in this and he dabbles in that." The list of things in which he dabbles seems chosen because it suits the rhymes: "he dabbles in colour and buttons and strings, pork chops and pasta and lemony things"—none of which seem particularly scary. The pictures are a little scary, intricate and slightly spooky, filled with intriguing details worth exploring—but only tangentially related to the verse.

Which brings me to *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance* by Robert Heidbreder. Although this too is another full-colour glossy, it is the only picture book in the cluster with any explicit Canadian content. All the other books are global in a neutral, middle-class, Anglocentric way. They fall into the disquieting category Perry Nodelman describes in his 2003 review essay of eighty picture books, "As Canadian as Apple Pie and Old Glory." In describing them as a group, Nodelman says that they are "depressingly similar to picture books being produced in the U.S. and internationally, depressingly similar to countless thousands of picture books produced in the last century" (96). That's what I thought about the books in my review package. I'd understood that I was to be reviewing Canadian poetry books—but there was nothing particularly Canadian about the books I've discussed so far. If I look generally at the 2004-2005 publication lists on Amazon, I can find a collection of nursery verse (*Wee Sing Mother Goose* by Pamela

Conn Beall), a naughty baby book (*Good Babies, Bad Babies* by John Lawrence), a naughty kitty book (*Kitten's First Full Moon* by Kevin Henkes) and a book about collecting (Kathleen Bart's *A Tale of Two Teddies*).

I'm not saying that Canadian books have to be about moose, loons, beaver and roughing it in the bush, but I do want to note that, besides the books by Lee and Lawson, only *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance* had any explicitly Canadian content. A national literature helps us locate ourselves in an increasingly globalized culture, so it's a particular pleasure to find books that do that. Admittedly, I'm not at all sure why these dinosaurs decide to dance at night, rising from their fossil sites in Drumheller, Alberta. The illustrations suggest that they arise from the dreams of the dinosaur fixations of the sleeping child in the first spread, the child with a dinosaur lamp and dinosaur puppets and mobiles above his bed.

Here's my favourite verse:

> But when the moon rises in the sky,
> Drumheller dinosaurs transmogrify.
>
> They stir their bones from secret cracks
> And assemble themselves—
> Fronts, sides and backs.

I think that's the first time I've seen the word "transmogrify" in a children's book. I like it. The rest of the book is something like a wild rumpus pajama party (in the tradition of the famous wild rumpus in Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*) carried on by dinosaur bones and dreaming children. All that is fine, but on the conventional side. There's no psychological or narrative tension, nothing to be frightened or concerned about. The book itself offers the first glimpse, fulfilled in the next two books discussed, about the importance of "landscape and memory"—which is the title of an eloquent book on the subject by Simon Schama. "National identity," he writes, "would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: Its topography mapped, elaborated and enriched as a homeland" (15). Yes. I want that "ferocious enchantment" in Canadian poetry books for children. And in the books by Lee and Lawson, I've got it.

Here are the real Canadian Poetry Books

At the end of "As Canadian and Apple Pie and Old Glory," Perry Nodelman writes poignantly about how only two of the eighty Canadian picture books he reviewed transcend the rest. I feel like that about *So Cool* and *The Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask*. Nodelman explains:

> Children's literature is a commodity—a marketable

> product increasingly controlled by market forces quite untroubled by concerns for quality or excellence. It takes daring and exceedingly cagey writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers to produce interesting books in this depressing context. (127)

Lee and Lawson—along with their illustrators and publishers—succeed in the "cagey" way. Their books should serve as models for the kind of book to which other Canadian publishers should aspire.

Dennis Lee is, of course, the father (perhaps the grandfather now) of Canadian children's poetry. Since the 1970s, he's had children chanting "Alligator Pie." He's also embedded the landscapes, place names, and the urban cultures of Canada deeply into his children's poems. *So Cool* is for slightly older, perhaps school-aged children—and so the delicious slur in the title especially as it is depicted on the cover: So Cool/School. It's a virtuoso performance, moving with apparent effortlessness through a Caribbean prayer ("Spell for Growing"), playground verse ("Red Rover"), lullaby ("Rainy Day Night"), ballad ("Inspector Dogbone Gets his Man"), medieval parody ("Sir Ethelred and the Fateful Tong"), a comic graphic short novel in verse ("To My Friend, the Total Loser"), and other forms. For some reason, however, a few requisite junior-high-school poems about zits or body image seem to have been thrown in. They weren't necessary, because when Lee stares hard into the backbone of traditional (here Caribbean) verse, as he does in "Spell for Growing," he is thrilling:

> Old momma teach me music
> Made of juniper and bone
> Old momma teach me silence
> In the certainty of stone.

It's a perfectly balanced stanza: "music" set against "silence," the rhyming of "bone" with "stone." Lee attends to the Creole inflection and so pays eloquent tribute to the Caribbean influence on Canadian (okay, particularly Toronto) culture. In so doing, he takes a conventional adolescent identity problem and resolves it in unconventional, non-white terms. If one of the points of the collection is to address issues of adolescent angst and self-searching here is an eloquent example. What's brilliant about Lee is that he also knows how to mix up the (multi)cultural content—and so faithfully renders the faces of Toronto. In "Red Rover," Lee takes a traditional Anglo playground verse and sharpens its inherent connection to mortality. The poem begins with the breezy "I once had a dog and her name was Red Rover," but ends with "Where burdocks and clover / Lie over Red Rover; Beneath the cold cold grass." Lee winds a refrain line through the poem "Stop here, or gently pass." It's a line from Wordsworth's "The

Solitary Reaper."

So Cool is addressed to readers at the end of childhood, on the cusp of adolescence. Nursery and playground verses gradually give way to more contemplative adult concerns. In "the museum of dirty minds," Lee speaks to the unspeakable: "The stuff that goes on in my mind, I wouldn't / feed it to a pit bull."

The narrator would abandon the unspeakable stuff:

> I'd leave this carton at the door, with breathing holes
> and a typed-up note: "Please find enclosed
> one dirty mind. Take good care of it—din-dins at
> night, walkies if you remember—and oh by the way, kindly
> strangle the filthy thing before it pollutes your museum.

Here's colloquial diction handled with subtle metrical flexibility. It's dominantly iambic but cleverly varied—as in the use, for example of the triple-stressed, "'typed-up note," technically a mollossus. I've only touched on the metrical and emotional range of Lee's verse, but it does move from the silly adolescent "We're popping pimples in the park, / Popping pimples after dark," to the mystical authority of "Long Chant":

> One by water,
> Two by flame,
> Tree by the power
> Of the name.
> Four by lightning,
> Five by hush,
> In the bare and
> Burning bush.

Frequently, in sympathetic harmony with a teenaged-personality, Lee swerves between adult sensitivity, seriousness, and consciousness of mortality—and teenaged goofiness and invulnerability. Sometimes he just plays with the raucousness of a teenager: In "the pest," for example, "You are a clod, a total putz. / I loathe your palpitating guts." And there is delicious sexual naughtiness in "Me and the Ultimate Sensual Experience":

> What can I tell you? Paradise gets leaky;
> Me too, and then you
> Wake up totally goobered. Stuck to your pj's.

At the end, there is the wondrous expression of faith: "Deeper. You must go further. You must go deeper."

Lawson does go deeper. An accomplished poet for adults and children, Lawson too brings a poet's depth and breadth to his handling of verse. The gnomic qualities apparent in his adult collections,

Inklings and *Love is an Observant Traveller*, are equally visible in his verse for children. Lawson's *Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask* has the distinction of having been selected as one of the five finalists for the first *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. In the essay analyzing the winning collections, the judges, Richard Flynn, Kelly Hager, and Joseph Thomas write enthusiastically about Lawson's work: "*The Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask* is eminently satisfying, more musically pleasing than anything else we received. . . ." The judges then proceed to make elegant comparisons between Lawson's work and that of eminent American poets, particularly Theodore Roethke and John Ciardi. Lawson attends to poets who preceded him, acknowledging influence without appearing to be anxious. In "She Crept Across the Crevice," for example, Lawson defamiliarizes an ordinary moment and makes it strange: "She crept across the crevice with criminal intent, / but when she stood upright she found her urge to injure went." She looks again: "And indeed near the ground, she suddenly found / that her devilish thoughts came back."

The poem reminds me of Ted Hughes's "Chief Inspector of Holes" from *Meet My Folks*, with its comic surface hinting at dangers below. Lawson, like Hughes, isn't satisfied with the easy surface joke. The comic twist comes at the price of high seriousness, in language and in imagery. In the poem "Aghast," for example, Lawson plays out the assonantal connection with "a ghost," and then develops a much more complex, subtle language played through the weight of hard "g"s:

> Aghast that a guest was a ghost,
> a fellow guest goaded the host—
> The gist of it was
> he was angry because
> a gust from a ghost chilled his toast.

How many other poets trust child readers to cope with "goaded" or "gist"—or the presence of the scary in the ordinary context of cold toast?

Lawson also uses another perfect poet's trick, throwing two unlikely characters together and seeing what happens when they merge: a game of recombinant DNA. Combine a rhinoceros with an ostrich and get a rhinostrich. Combine a hippopotamus with a blossom and get a hippopossum: "Beneath that bougainvillea blossom, / behold my friends, the hippopussum." There is the guard dog flower which is "deep-rooted in the loam," in "My Garden Breeds a Savage Bloom": "I like how it intimidates / each nose who stoops to sniff it." It's a clever line, evoking a connection between sniffing dogs and sniffing people. These poems remind me of the dangers lurking in Ted Hughes's "moon" poems for children.

Like Lee, Lawson is also good at locating the

domestic specifics of his Toronto neighbourhood. United Bakers, Admirial Road, and Harbord Street, familiar landmarks. And there is the magical Matrix restaurant (I wondered if it hinted at the Mars restaurant on College Street), a ballad poem of love lost and found:

> He was washing the dishes,
> A man with eyelashes
> so long they could butter your toast.

Lawson's collection succeeds because of its metrical variety, its allusiveness, its trust in the audience to rise to the occasion of the complexity, subtlety and sadness of the verse. It succeeds in its joy in the local and the familiar as well as the foreign and the strange.

I don't want to leave my discussion of Lawson and Lee without commenting on how well both are served by their illustrators. Maryann Kovalski's black wash drawings for Lee's *So Cool* offer a haunting grainy newspapery feel—except when she draws a cartoon graphic comic book text to accompany Lee's narrative poem, or styles a school notebook page for "What I Learned in Math Today," or the Gothic script for the title of the comic medieval ballad, "Sir Ethelred and the Fateful Tong."

Sherwin Tjia is as respectful of Lawson's verse as Kovalski is of Lee's. The black and white and shades-of-gray drawings exploit the wonderful loopiness of ghostly characters or genetically modified creatures, without compromising their dignity. A shadow of "Vincent the Vanisher" stands in the doorway of a spiral staircase. A solid dense black frog leaps against a gray ground—with a small gray heron at the top right of the page in "The Frog Knows His Prognosis":

> The frog meets a heron
> alone in the wood,
> the frog knows his prognosis
> is not very good.
> If he could leap clear
> then he certainly would.

Although I introduced this verse with a discussion of the image that accompanies it, I want to return here to the verse itself, to the distinctly Canadian fatalism in it, and its direct links with the realistic animal stories of Ernest Thompson Seton (as expressed, for example, in Margaret Atwood's *Survival*) and in Kenneth Opel's *Silverwing*. "The Frog Knows His Prognosis" embodies the distinctiveness of Lawson's verse: his connection with Canadian as well as the broader poetic traditions in English, and his original stance, which is at once dark and funny.

The deep respect and understanding of poetic history and tradition Lee and Lawson demonstrate is what distinguishes their books. Their talent, metrical

skill and evocations of Canadian experience make theirs the best books of Canadian poetry in the bunch. There ought to be more books like these. Publishers take note.

Works Cited

Flynn, Richard, Kelly Hager and Joseph Thomas. "It Could be Verse." *Lion and the Unicorn* 29.3 (September 2005): 427–441.

Heaney, Seamus. "Feeling into Words," *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. London: Faber, 1984. 41–60.

Hughes, Ted. *Meet My Folks*. London: Puffin, 1977.

---. *Moon Whales and Other Moon Poems*. New York: Viking, 1976.

Nodelman, Perry, "As Canadian as Apple Pie and Old Glory." *CCL/LCJ* 111-112 (Fall/Winter 2003): 91–127

Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins, 1995

Lissa Paul is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She is also one of two associate general editors of *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (Norton 2005), and one of three editors of *The Lion and the Unicorn*.