Views, Reviews & Interviews
Points de vue, comptes rendus, entrevues

Is That a Fact? The "Real" World Through Children's Non-fiction
—Janette Hughes

Becker, Helaine. *Boredom Blasters: Brain Bogglers, Awesome Activities, Cool Comics, Tasty Treats, and More*. Illus. Claudia Davila. Maple Tree Press, 2004. 160 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 1-897066-03-1.

Bowers, Vivien. *That's Very Canadian!* Illus. Dianne Eastman. Maple Tree Press, 2004. 96 pp. $29.95 hc. ISBN 1-897066-04-X.

Drobot, Eve. *Money, Money, Money: Where It Comes From, How to Save it, Spend It & Make It*. Illus. Claudia Davila. Maple Tree Press, 2004. 95 pp. $19.95 pb. ISBN 1-897066-11-2.

Edwards, Wallace. *Monkey Business*. Kids Can, 2004. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-462-2.

Farmer, Bonnie. *ABC Letters in the Library*. Illus. Chum McLeod. Lobster Press, 2004. N. pag. $21.95. ISBN 189422287-3.

Organ, Betty. *My Newfoundland and Labrador Counting Book*. Illus. Dana Carter. Tuckamore Books, 2004. N. pag. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-894294-77-7.

O'Reilly, Gillian. *Slangalicious: Where We Got That Crazy Lingo*. Illus. Krista Johnson. Annick Press, 2004. 84 pp. $14.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-764-7.

Renaud, Anne. *A Bloom of Friendship: The Story of the Canadian Tulip Festival*. Illus. Ashley Spires. Lobster Press, 2004. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-89422-289-X.

Romanek, Trudee. *Wow! The Most Interesting Book You'll Ever Read About the Five Senses*. Illus. Rose Cowles. Kids Can Press, 2004. 40 pp. $7.95 pb. ISBN 1-55337-630-7.

Shannon, Rosemarie. *Franklin's Picture Dictionary*. Kids Can, 2004. 111 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-652-8.

Wallace, Mary, and Jessica Wallace. *The Girls' Spa Book: 20 Dreamy Ways to Relax and Feel Great*. & Maple Tree Press, 2004. 64 pp. $21.95 hc. ISBN 1-897066-00-7.

Weaver, Janice. *The A to Z of Everyday Things*. Illus. Francis Blake. Tundra Books, 2004. 116 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-671-4.

At this year's book fair at my children's school, I was surprised to see a table marked with a sign that read "Books for Boys." On the table were a variety of books with themes ranging from Nascar racing and other sports to exciting adventure tales. With the recent release of the movie *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Lemony Snicket's books were present, as were books in Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants series. Andy Griffiths's recently released book, *Zombie Butts from Uranus* was also there, indicating that perhaps Scholastic believes boys to be primarily interested in sports and toilet humour. The vast majority of the books on the table, however, were informational books.

This piqued my curiosity, for a couple of reasons. As a parent, I didn't see much on this table that would interest either of my sons. For the past two years, our eldest son, currently in grade five, has come home with report cards that repeatedly encourage him to widen his reading repertoire by selecting works of non-fiction more often. What would my sons think when they came to the book fair and realized that the "books for boys" were not books that appealed to them? And what did this mean about the rest of the books in the book fair? Were they only for the girls? Was there something "wrong" with the boys if they didn't prefer non-fiction to fiction? As D. Jackson and J. Salisbury, W. Martino, and M. Mills all suggest, in our efforts to entice reluctant readers to pick up a book, we sometimes reinscribe assumptions about children – in this case, assumptions about gender that rely on essentialist notions. When the opportunity came to review a collection of Canadian non-fiction books, all published in 2004 and representing a wide variety of topics and styles, I jumped at the chance to explore further some of the assumptions that authors

of non-fiction make about children and the topics that might appeal to them.

While our house is filled with books, I would estimate that non-fiction books make up less than ten percent of the whole. This is certainly not because we don't value non-fiction in our home. On the contrary, we recognize that non-fiction, in the form of textbooks, recipes, information on the Internet, instructions, and so on, constitutes the bulk of reading most people do on a daily basis, especially as adults. C. Lynch-Brown and C. Tomlinson suggest that, since most daily reading demands are expository, all students would benefit from learning how to read non-fiction material (165). But while teachers expect students to write expository pieces, especially when they enter secondary school, they typically haven't previously encouraged them to read extensively or effectively in this area in the classroom. This poses a problem since, as Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson point out, "it is only through repeated experience with a specific genre that one learns how to read or write in that genre" (166).

What can teachers do to encourage students to broaden their reading choices to include more non-fiction? A good place to begin would be for teachers to demonstrate to students that non-fiction is a valued literary genre by displaying works of non-fiction in a prominent place in the classroom and by promoting the reading of non-fiction across the curriculum. Most important, teachers and librarians need to select high-quality non-fiction as an alternative to fiction. Of course, good non-fiction must be accurate and current, especially in an age when it is often more convenient to seek information on the World Wide Web than it is to make a trip to the library or bookstore. Although the Internet is a valuable resource, a typical search does not necessarily lead us to the best information on a subject. Results often depend on how a website is tagged using key words, for example, not on the quality of information that is offered. Much of what we find on the Web is scattered, incoherent, and informal. Although I personally espouse the use of the Internet (with a good dose of critical awareness thrown in) as a tool for classroom research, especially with this generation of students who have grown up digitally literate or "digirate," I believe we need to balance good non-fiction texts with electronic information technologies. Unlike the Web, non-fiction texts can at least boast that they have survived the editing process and, although the editorial process of publishing non-fiction books does not always guarantee that all information is accurate, it does introduce a checking process that a self-edited website would not have.

One of the things that makes children's non-fiction appealing is that it can be picked up and read in short bursts. Although some forms of non-fiction, such as historical non-fiction texts that are written in a narrative form that requires the reader's continuing attention, most non-fiction books are organized by topic and can therefore be read in a non-linear way. The reading experience needs to be pleasurable enough that students will come back to it again and again, for they are not just reading the text for information. A reader can use a non-fiction text like an encyclopedia or a dictionary to look up a fact or an answer to a specific question; however the reader might also be reading with a more general goal in mind. For example, a child might be curious about the five senses and wish to learn more. Some children simply prefer to read non-fiction. A compelling text offers a human dimension, something more than just the facts, that draws the reader in and encourages her to read on.

Whether students read non-fiction to find the answer to a specific question they might have or whether they are reading for pleasure or to gain insight into a topic in general, there is an expectation that they will find, if not "truth," then at least facts. Non-fiction represents the world we live in by offering a picture of the world, in an attempt to order and organize it. Because of this, we need to examine the books not only in terms of their style, and the content they explore, but also in light of the assumptions they make about gender, class, race, and appearance, and, more generally, about what people are (or should be) like.

In what follows, I examine the assumptions that are made in each of the books, as a parent and educator. But, while I approached this review with that goal in mind, I was also interested in hearing and observing students' reactions to the books to learn what they found appealing (or not) about each text. To that end, I sought the perspectives of a teacher-librarian and two groups of elementary school children. Rather than solely focusing on my own standards for evaluating non-fiction and applying them to the books in this collection, I felt it was important to seek the comments of the children for whom they were created. Although we cannot draw any generalizations about how all children will respond from the comments offered by the children who participated in the focus groups described below, their comments might help us to determine whether they are aware of the evaluative concerns raised in this review and provide some insight into how these particular children read and respond to these books.

Working in conjunction with Amie Donais, teacher-librarian at Jack Chambers Public School in the Thames Valley District School Board in Southwest

Ontario, I met with five primary students and six junior students to read the selected books. In the selection process for these focus groups, we asked teachers to identify students in their classes who are not necessarily the strongest readers, but who would be interested in spending a morning perusing books and who would be able to articulate their opinions about what they had read. After undertaking an ethical review and the requisite parental permissions, we met with the primary group (grades 1-3) first. The group consisted of one grade 1 student, two grade 2 students and two grade 3 students. There were three girls and two boys in the group. The groups were arranged around two large round tables in the resource centre. I sat at one table with three students and Amie sat at the other table with two students. Amie and I each spent time talking to the students about their reading preferences through open-ended questions, including: Do you like to read? What kinds of books do you usually read when you have a choice? What do you like about those kinds of books? We spread the appropriate books on the tables and encouraged the children to select the books they wanted to read. Amie and I read some of the books to them and encouraged them to read aloud to us as well. The children also had time to look through the books at the illustrations and to read quietly. Once they had spent some time with the books, we asked them more open-ended questions about their responses to the books, including, which books were their favourites and why?, which books did not appeal to them and why not?, did the subject matter interest them?, is it important for children their age to know about this topic?, and how would they read this book—from start to end (linear) or in a more random way (non-linear)? We also made observations as we watched the children read and respond to the books.

We repeated the process with the junior focus group (grades 4-6), but allowed them more time to read independently. The junior group consisted of one boy and one girl from each of the grades.

Of the eleven students involved in this project, only one, a female in the primary group, identified non-fiction as her preferred genre. When asked what topics they usually chose when they did select non-fiction material from the library or bookstore, all of the students seemed to have difficulty answering and were not able to identify anything in particular. This surprised me, because several of the students mentioned fantasy and adventure as their favourite types of fiction, and I had anticipated that they would report reading related non-fiction material. After they had spent some time with the books, Amie and I asked them to share their impressions and observations about them with us. Their general impressions and comments about the books are peppered throughout this review.

For the most part, the books under review

reflect the developing proficiency of the Canadian book publishing industry. The vibrant and colourful illustrations in pinks, oranges and lime greens, often reminiscent of the world of fashion, are visually inviting and complement the texts. Some of the books, most notably Vivien Bowers's *That's Very Canadian!*, Anne Renaud's *A Bloom of Friendship*, and Eve Drobot's *Money, Money, Money*, juxtapose photographs with original, energetic, and colourful drawings for a positive effect. The use of mixed media helps to create a dense visual texture, which to some extent, blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction, since photographs represent actual people, objects and events whereas drawings are more often associated with fictional works. However, as one astute reader in our junior focus group pointed out "how the photographs [*i.e.* all of the illustrations] enhance the text is more important than whether the pictures are drawn or real." In keeping with the recent trend in non-fiction, the text of these books, without exception, is written in a light, conversational style (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 166). In fact, both Gillian O'Reilly's *Slangalicious* and Bowers' *That's Very Canadian!* pretend to be narratives told by students writing school reports. In both books, the imaginary student narrators have "helpers" to assist them in the presentation of the information. In *Slangalicious*, two "slang experts" from the Internet guide the hip young narrator through his research on the origin of slang in general, and of specific slang terms, while in *That's Very Canadian!,* a cartoon animal trio consisting of a goose, a moose, and a beaver assist Rachel in her exploration of "all things Canadian" by asking questions, telling jokes, making puns, and adding interesting anecdotes. This particular technique was popular with the students in our focus groups. They especially enjoyed the humour and word play provided by Rachel's older brother, who scribbles his (often sarcastic) comments and opinions throughout her report. The comments sometimes offer additional information, but their main purpose seems to be to add humour.

A generic feature shared in these books is the careful organization of text. The texts in them are broken up by headings and subheadings, maps, tables, charts, and informational boxes, which are arranged to help guide the reader's eye over the page. Although too much of such activity on one page can sometimes be overwhelming to a reader, the use of colourful break-out boxes of this sort allow the reader to pause and linger over the material, rather than having to read everything in one particular sequence. It is a technique analogous to hypertext, which is written using associative links—a familiar genre for a generation weaned on the Internet and Nintendo. Other generic similarities include the use of tables of contents, indexes, glossaries, and bibliographies, and these attest to the authors' competence to address

their chosen topics. Clearly, a non-fiction writer must know the material well, and must be sure to distinguish between fact and opinion.

Readers tend to assume that material presented in non-fiction texts is factual, real, or true. Therefore, when information based on personal opinion is offered, the author should indicate that it represents one perspective on the subject. In Trudee Romanek's *Wow! The Most Interesting Book You'll Ever Read About the Five Senses*, a nominee for the Silver Birch Award in Ontario, the author draws on evolutionary theory to offer an explanation as to why "on average, women have a better sense of smell than men, but men are better at seeing small movements." Romanek suggests that these abilities "may have made prehistoric men better hunters and helped the women find plants that were safe to eat" (5). An evolutionary view fails to recognize that gender is largely a social construction. It is all too easy to use evolutionary theory to explain away supposed gender differences because then questions of imbalances of power do not need to be addressed. In Romanek's case, however, she is careful to use the word "may" to indicate that this is one possible explanation. In the chapter on sight, on the other hand, Romanek offers as a fact that "more than 90 percent of people who are partially color-blind are male" (13), but she offers no explanation or evidence as to why this is the case. Romanek is not the only author in this collection of non-fiction books of whom this criticism could be made. Amie Donais comments "if there is one weakness in this group of books, it would be that the *why* is sometimes missing."

In addition to the responsibility non-fiction authors have to provide accurate and current information, they must also try to avoid generalizations and be certain that there is an absence of stereotyping by gender, race, age, or religion. I was delighted to see cultural diversity represented in almost all of these books. On closer examination, however, the representation of various cultures remains problematic. For example, while children of various cultures are present in Bonnie Farmer's *ABC Letters in the Library*, none of the adult teachers and librarians featured is other than white, trendy, and young. Nor is anyone in the book disabled, overweight, or poorly dressed. Although the book offers a charming, cheerful, and alliterative look at all of the wonderful things we can do in a library, it does not offer a realistic view of other things we might see while there. Struggling or reluctant readers, for example, do not appear in these pages full of children who are happily engaged in reading and learning. Stereotypes of teens and the elderly are reinforced through illustrations of an old man asleep behind his newspaper and a teenage boy tipping back on his chair with his feet up on the table. The librarian "tsks" at the "loud teens, who grin and then shrug." The children in our focus group

enjoyed this book very much, stopping at each letter and trying to find all of the things depicted on the pages that begin with the featured letter. This ideal world of the library did not seem incongruent with the experiences of the students in our focus group and, if it was, they did not contest it. If they did not see themselves represented in the pages of this book, they made no mention of it, indicating, perhaps, that they need to be made more aware of critical reading practices.

In the three books that have a main narrator or protagonist, all three are blonde-haired and attractive. In fact, Rachel, the narrator created out of a collage of drawings and real photographs in Bowers' *That's Very Canadian!* has striking blue eyes, a long, blonde pony tail, and quite a shapely figure. It is interesting to note that the book's subtitle, *An Exceptionally Interesting Report About All Things Canadian* sets the tone of the book, which tends to generalize what it means to be a Canadian. For instance, the book foregrounds the moose, goose, and beaver as symbols of Canada by featuring them on every page, yet I wonder how many Canadians have any real-life experience with any of these creatures. But the children in the focus groups were quite familiar with these traditional Canadian icons, suggesting that this is not the first time they have encountered them. Bowers does make an attempt to examine "some of the silly stereotypes other people have about what Canada is like" (67) and tries to dispel the notion that Canadians live in igloos and travel by snowmobile. But because she focuses to a large degree on the flora and fauna of Canada, she inadvertently reinforces some of these stereotypes instead, in particular the notion that Canada is a vast, predominantly non-urban country. Each of the country's provinces and territories is represented on a two-page spread, which features the province's coat of arms, a story about the origin of the province's name, and pictures and information about the official bird and official flower of the province. Virtually all of the photographs are of the natural world; Canada's urban centres and diverse populations are not featured at all. Nor, aside from a brief mention on a two-page spread about canoes, is the subject of Canada's First Nations people addressed, and a collage of immigrant children's faces with speech bubbles voicing their own observations about what it means to be Canadian is relegated to the end of the book. Two of the children in the primary focus group are from immigrant families, so we lingered over this collage and read some of the stereotypical notions the immigrant children had of Canadians. For example, "typical Canadians" always complain about the weather, Canadian kids complain about having to go to school, and Canadians are always "orderly and courteous," and remove their shoes when they go indoors. Without prompting, one

grade-two boy exclaimed, "That's not true! All of my friends love the winter and like coming to school!" The others agreed and offered some of their own comments, similarly contesting some of the ways that Canadians were represented.

The celebration of Canada as a pastoral ideal is also found in *Franklin's Picture Dictionary*, compiled by Rosemarie Shannon and based on the popular Bourgeois series, and in Betty Organ's *My Newfoundland and Labrador Counting Book*. In the latter, the protagonist, who shows us around her idyllic town, has long blonde hair and *red* eyes—something that troubled several of the primary students in our focus groups. The first thing that we encounter in this landscape brimming with lush forests, fields of green, and deep blue skies and ocean is "one very large brown moose." The remaining pages take us on a rural romp through flowery meadows and golden beaches and then finally home to the smell of freshly baked bread. On our travels with the narrator, we are challenged to find the numbers hidden on each page, but unfortunately, according to our primary students, the task is "too easy." Like many traditional counting books, the text is written in rhyme, but the rhythm of the lines is often inconsistent and, as a result, the text seems rather contrived. For example, when the narrator encounters her Aunt Irene, hanging laundry out to dry, she says, "She's hanging towels on the line right by her front gate./Let's count them one by one, indeed . . . there are EIGHT!" Although the students who read this book identified the rhyme scheme as one of the book's positive aspects, one student pointed out that, although it rhymed, "the rhyme doesn't work." This student's reaction was echoed by his peers, who made similar comments that the half-rhymes on some of the pages seemed awkward and that the rhythm of the lines was not consistent.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming in Organ's book is its stereotypical portrayal of gender roles. The women in the book consist of Grandma, who is knitting in her rocker on the porch, Aunt Irene, who is hanging laundry on the line, and the narrator's mother, who is in the kitchen baking bread. The men, on the other hand, are "busy stacking firewood" and "working very hard even though the day is hot." There is no mention of the women's domestic work being difficult as well, or that women do more than just housework. Despite the fact that traditional gender roles continue to shift significantly in Canada, this author portrays gender roles in stereotypical ways. If the portrayal of gender roles in this book is incongruent with the children's own experiences, however, they did not mention it. It would be interesting to explore this further to try to determine whether this is something that they just did not notice because they have not been taught to think critically about the texts they read, or whether they read past the gender stereotyping because they are accustomed to these kinds of portrayals and

readily accept them.

Other books in this collection that reinscribe traditional notions about gender roles include *Franklin's Picture Dictionary*, Wallace Edwards' *Monkey Business*, Helaine Becker's *Boredom Blasters* and, of course, *The Girls' Spa Book* by Mary and Jessica Wallace. Although Bear's mother in the Franklin series is a doctor, the females are generally depicted in stereotypical ways. Harriet, Franklin's little sister, is always illustrated with her pink or purple hair ribbon and Franklin wears his characteristic baseball cap. The mothers in the book are often shown working in their gardens or in the kitchen wearing aprons and Beaver, who subverts traditional gender norms by insisting on being one of the knights rather than the maiden to be rescued in the Paulette Bourgeois book, *Franklin is Messy*, is featured in the *Dictionary* wearing a pink tutu under P for Pretty and wearing a crown and pink gown under D for Dress. These particular illustrations seem to be inconsistent with what Bourgeois is attempting to do elsewhere. Although my family has accumulated almost the entire Franklin series over the years, and I recognize many of the illustrations as scenes taken from the books, it is still unclear whether some of the illustrations have been created just for *Franklin's Picture Dictionary*. The students in our primary focus group felt that the dictionary was "too young" for them, reporting that they don't watch Franklin anymore, but they did think that the resource pages (numbers, days of the week and months of the year, seasons, etc.), found at the back of the book might be very helpful for children in preschool or kindergarten. Young Franklin fans, like my three-year-old daughter, are sure to be delighted with the familiar characters and setting, and parents, often quick to react to their children's interest in the television show and/or books, will probably respond favourably to the educational flavour of the dictionary format.

In *Monkey Business*, Wallace Edwards' beautifully illustrated book on idioms, the author/illustrator seems at first glance to have successfully sidestepped the issues of gender and ethnic diversity by depicting animals rather than humans. However, Edwards does designate gender to his characters, thus opening the door to the same kind of scrutiny. For instance, King Pigglebottom, a pig, engaging in sport, is "on the ball" and Gavin, a rather grotesque grasshopper, is reading comic books "snug as a bug in a rug," two activities generally associated with males. Among the females represented, Eloise is depicted as a fish in her kitchen, Peg is a pink flamingo, and Isadora is a butterfly. How refreshing it would be to see some of these traditional ideas turned on their heads. Although using animals prevents Edwards from having to deal with issues of ethnic diversity, his choice of British-sounding names, the general Victorian flavour of

the illustrations, and the activities in which some of the animals are engaging do offer the reader some class commentary. For example, Reginald, a British bulldog reclining on a regal chair, is quite the dandy in his sequined dressing gown, eating sausages with his toenails painted pink, and "reflecting on his life of hard-won luxury," for, after all, "Tis a dog-eat-dog world." Despite all this, Edwards' *Monkey Business* was clearly one of the children's favourites in this collection of non-fiction books. They enjoyed the illustrations immensely, commenting that "they were funny" or "silly" and that "the detail makes the animals look so real, but they're doing silly things animals wouldn't really do." They especially liked finding the hidden monkey on each page and, unlike the numbers in *My Newfoundland and Labrador Counting Book*, the students found this task quite challenging.

Interestingly enough, though, all of the students in the focus groups reported that they were not familiar with most of the idioms in the book. By the end of the session, however, the students did have a concrete idea of what an idiom is and they were able, through the repeated practice offered in this book, to identify a few idioms they had heard their parents or relatives use. This last observation indicates that *Monkey Business* is a book that can be read in a variety of ways. I would happily use this book to introduce the concept of idioms to students.

Helaine Becker's *Boredom Blasters*, a collection of puzzles, recipes, tricks, comics, and activities that was popular with the students, especially at the junior level, is full of fun and energy. It depicts boys and girls engaged in jumping, swinging, dancing, reading, and playing a variety of sports. There is a definite intent here to subvert gender norms, but it is not always successful. For example, there is a female pirate, but her name is Lady Pink and she is resplendent in high heels and heavy makeup. Nevertheless, *Boredom Blasters* was the book identified most often by our students as the one they would like to come back to again and again. One student suggested that she would like to read it all and that it would be a "great book to bring on a trip."

Not surprisingly, *The Girls' Spa Book* by Mary Wallace and Jessica Wallace makes no attempt to subvert traditional gender assumptions. As its cover illustration and its subtitle boast, this is a book full of activities and recipes that will promote relaxation. When my nine-year-old son spied this book on my kitchen counter, he picked it up and immediately quipped, "hey, boys like to take baths and relax, too." His feeling of exclusion was not unwarranted. None of the boys in our focus group wanted to crack the cover of this book, perhaps fearing ridicule from their peers. But who could blame them? They are probably too young and too immersed in the world of peer pressure to be aware that there are

alternate ways of constructing masculinity. They likely would not have noticed the recent attention given to "metrosexuals"—urban males who embody the heightened aesthetic sense often associated with stereotypical ideas of what gay men are like—unless they were familiar with shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Even if they were, showing an interest in a book overtly targeting a female audience would be too risky among peers. This was clearly not a book written for boys and girls, since there are no boys represented at all. Although diverse cultures and a girl in a wheelchair are represented, all of the illustrations depict pretty girls, with full, pink lips, glossy hair, and slim figures. They wear flower barrettes, toe rings, colourful bangles, and heart belts and necklaces. Although the text encourages "celebrating the person" within by recognizing "inner beauty," and many of the activities promote the importance of feeling good about oneself through "de-stressing" and relaxation (all very worthy sentiments), many of the recipes included focus on looking good on the outside. To accompany the Girl Talk sections, which celebrate family, friendship, and being "true" to oneself, there are recipes for "luscious lip gloss," "dream hand cream," "lovely body lotion," and "sumptuous shampoo," all labels that seem to promote happiness through products. While it is abundantly clear that this book is aimed at a female audience, the recipes and activities suggest that girls with time and money are further targeted. Despite the authors' claim that "all of the ingredients used in the recipes in this book are fairly inexpensive" they are not items typically found in the cupboards of the average household, so time and money will have to be spent acquiring them. Add to that the equipment and containers, gift baskets, wrap, and ribbons required to package the products once they've been made and this becomes a costly endeavour.

Nevertheless, *The Girls' Spa Book* successfully drew in the girls in our focus group. They reported liking the colours, illustrations, and the "lessons" that were taught "about friendship, how everyone is different and that it's the inside that counts." They also got quite excited about borrowing the book to try some of the recipes themselves. I did give this book to a friend's nine-year old daughter and she and her friends followed a few of the recipes. They enjoyed the activities and were able to successfully concoct and test some of the products working independently. The girls report that the lotions were suitably smooth and the lip gloss tasted and smelled divine, however, I understand from my friend that the girls' day at the spa generated quite a mess!

Janice Weaver's *The A to Z of Everyday Things* relates the stories of twenty-six commonplace things we encounter in our everyday lives, and coincidentally explores threads that are developed in other books under review here, ranging from the alphabet

and games, to money, tulips, and even underwear, which we also read about in *Slangalicious*. Each entry is written in a conversational, entertaining style and densely packed with fascinating historical and cultural details. The black and white line drawings by Francis Blake are quirky and fun but, unfortunately, they are reserved only for the first page of each entry. In this collection of books being reviewed, the lack of colour in *The A to Z of Everyday Things* certainly stands out. And, although Weaver attempts to offer commentary on the items and concepts from a variety of cultural perspectives, there are other absences in the book besides colour. The book is primarily written with a Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian slant. For example, an entry on underwear begins, "Ever since Adam and Eve discovered modesty and decided to cover themselves with fig leaves, people have been wearing undergarments" (83). Nor, in her section on kissing, does Weaver take up the possibility of alternate sexuality when the opportunity arises, instead commenting that, while women are "equal-opportunity kissers, bussing both men and other women with quiet confidence," men "reserve the social kiss for women only" (45). Still, with each entry averaging approximately three pages each, Weaver cannot possibly cover her topics completely and she must choose to leave some things out.

The students in our focus group had mixed reactions to Weaver's book. When they were given the opportunity to flip through the books before making their choice, they all put this book aside. When asked about this, one student commented that "there are too many words and no colour pictures," but once they were urged to read at least a few entries, several of the students enjoyed doing so. Another student suggested that this is the kind of book that he might come back to periodically, rather than reading it from beginning to end in one sitting. *The A to Z of Everyday Things* is a nice companion piece to Weaver's first book, *From Head to Toe: Bound Feet, Bathing Suits, and Other Bizarre and Beautiful Things*, another nominee in the 2005 Silver Birch Reading Program. The students' initial reaction to *Everyday Things* was most interesting but not necessarily surprising. Recent studies in the areas of multiple literacies, multimodal literacies, and digital literacies suggest that students approach text with sophisticated sets of skills and with the expectation that various modes (such as visual, gestural, aural, textual, and interactive) will be represented (Alvermann; Dresang; Gee; Knobel and Lankshear; Kress). When that expectation was not immediately met, each of the students in the focus groups set the book aside. Perhaps it has always been the case that young readers have been more attracted to texts with colourful pictures; however, when juxtaposed against the collection of other books on the table, replete with vibrant colour, graphics, photographs, and fancy fonts, this black and white,

unadorned book could not compete with its rivals. Judging by the reaction of this group of students, an informational book needs more than compelling text to draw the reader inside.

The final two books in this collection of non-fiction material are both informative about their respective topics, colourfully presented using a combination of historical photographs and bright and energetic illustrations, and they are well-organized with tables, maps, and information boxes set in different colours. Anne Renaud's *A Bloom of Friendship* recounts the story of the Canadian Tulip Festival by tracing the relationship between Queen Wilhelmina, ruler of the Netherlands during World War II, and Canada. The use of a timeline helps guide the reader through the events of the war and, in particular, the pivotal moments in the lives of the Dutch royal family. "Instant History Facts" and actual excerpts from newspapers of the time offer interesting bits of information about Canada's participation in the war and the plight of the Dutch people. But, despite the wealth of information offered in these pages, I would argue that the author does not go far enough in her discussion of the Holocaust. As Rebecca Lukens points out, "writers of non-fiction, like those of fiction, sometimes fall into a tone of condescension, oversimplifying, thinking of the readers as dear little things, or guarding their ears from the whole truth" (290). Renaud devotes a small box to Anne Frank and there is mention of the "deportation of over 100,000 Dutch Jews to Nazi death camps" but the enormity of this crime is glossed over. Perhaps it might be argued that subjects of such a sensitive nature should be left to books aimed at older children or adults; after all *A Bloom of Friendship* is a book in the My Canada Series, which is aimed at children in grades 3-5. But I suggest that children of that age are aware of all kinds of atrocities and horrific events. In the wake of September 11 and the recent devastation by hurricane Katrina, we need to find ways of talking to our children about these things, rather than trying to dodge the subjects.

When I first saw Eve Drobot's *Money, Money, Money*, I thought, now here's a book that will appeal to my youngest son, who at age seven, is the richest person in our family because he knows how to make money and save it. Although he did flip through the book and read some of the information in the "Check it Out!" sections, the text proved to be a bit too much for him. This comprehensive book offers an historical perspective on money from the first coins minted 2000 years ago, and considers the future of money as we move closer and closer to a cashless society. Drobot gives her readers practical advice about saving and investing money as well as the do's and don'ts of ATM use, and explains the difference between using debit and credit cards.

What Drobot doesn't discuss, however, is who

has money and who doesn't. Issues of economic inequality, the distribution and redistribution of wealth in North America, or the effects economic inequality has on socio-economic classes have not been touched upon, much less elaborated. Certainly these are complex issues, and perhaps are not as exciting as the chapter Drobot includes on "cops and robbers," but they are, nevertheless, important to introduce in a book about money. I am reminded of Eve Bunting's *Fly Away Home*, which takes a sensitive look at the plight of the homeless. Surely if this small picture book, appropriate for young children, can undertake to address some of these issues, Drobot might have devoted a chapter in her book to economic inequality. The omission, however, was not one that the children in the focus groups mentioned, if indeed they noticed it.

Although the style, colours, illustrations, and formats of the books under review attest to the advancements made in the publication of Canadian non-fiction, it is clear that many of the books continue to reinscribe conventional ideas and assumptions about what people are or should be like. Equally clear, as evidenced in our focus groups, is that many students read without questioning the text or considering the viewpoint of the author and illustrator. Students assume that non-fiction works are reflections of reality, rather than selective versions of reality, presented from a particular perspective. As Amie Donais points out, it is easy to be "conned" by "pictures and visually attractive text," and "as educators, we need to look more critically at what we read" and encourage children to do so also. This is particularly important for teachers and librarians when they are selecting books to purchase for children. As teachers, we can also help students become more aware of how the author/illustrator positions the reader to respond to the text in specific ways (Simpson 119). It appears we need to work harder to teach students to examine text more critically and to understand how written text sometimes contradicts the text of the illustrations.

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