

“erratically.” It is not the same reader who might recognize the allusions to Alice or to Bob Cratchit, allusions that have no flesh on them to suggest their significance to a reader who does not know their source. Nor is it the same reader who might recognize vestiges of MacDonald, Lewis or even LeGuin.

The Glass Beyond the Door in balance could be enjoyed, but not treasured, by children who have a taste for fantasy and an appreciation of fine phrasing.

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Mud, Bubbles, and Dark for Early Childhood

CAROL ANNE WIEN

Mud Puddle, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Sami Suomalainen. Annick Press, 1979. 30 pp. \$6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920236-47-2

The Dark, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Sami Suomalainen. Annick Press, 1979. 32 pp. \$6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929236-09-X

Up in Bubbles, Barbara Salsberg. Annick Press, 1979. 48 pp. \$6.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929236-37-5

Annick Press offers three new Canadian titles for young children. Munsch’s *Mud Puddle* and *The Dark* grew out of storytelling sessions with pre-school children, and Salsberg’s *Up in Bubbles* grew out of a childhood fantasy later developed into mime routine. All three stories, thus, had long histories before they were published as books. Salsberg’s story works as a series of visual images: its strength lies in the tautness and precision of the illustrations which convey the story with the clarity of mime. However, this

clarity is missing in the writing of the story itself which includes loose connections and extraneous bits of information. Munsch's stories, on the other hand, offer just this tautness and refined polish in the writing, a product no doubt of the fact they have been retold many times before being written.

Though adults examine children's books with an eye and an ear for literary and artistic merit, we must also assess the impact of the book's content on children at varying developmental levels: there must be a good "match" between picture book and listener. Munsch, in both titles, develops stories out of simple emotional concerns which occupy pre-schoolers. Three to five year olds are frequently overconcerned about food, eating, and the fear of being eaten, not to mention dirt with its deliciously manipulatable quality (and suggestion of feces) and adult-imposed taboos about getting dirty. Children are concerned about darkness, loss of security, and monsters. Munsch understands this. In each of his books he personifies one such concern. Once a problem is visible, it can, of course, be tackled. Our heroine, the irrepressible Jule Ann — a female behavior model of whom feminists will readily approve — goes out to play wearing clean new clothes.

"Unfortunately, there was a mud puddle hiding up in the apple tree.
It saw Jule Ann and jumped right on her head.
She got completely all over muddy." (p. 8)

Mother scrubs her clean, and mud puddle strikes again. Eventually, Jule Ann does a little active problem-solving — (involving the antithesis of mud) and sends mud puddle fleeing. In Munsch's second title, "a small dark" falls out of the cookie jar and frightens Jule Ann by eating all the shadows and by expanding in size. Eventually, the dark covers the entire yard and goes to sleep on the roof of the house. Jule Ann again finds her own solution. In demonstrating her self-confidence by resolving the conflicts herself she conveys to young children that it is possible to cope successfully with problems. Bettelheim (1977) argues that this adequate resolution of a conflict is absolutely necessary for young children.¹ It reduces the tension set up by the story situation and leaves the child feeling satisfied and confident that she/he too can cope. In Munsch's stories, each solution has a nice logical predictable connection to the problem. The stories work, thus, as small intellectual puzzles, ideally suited to the emotional concerns of a pre-schooler. They are structurally perfect and emotionally powerful.

Salsberg's story develops the seven to nine-year-old's fantasy of flying. Ellen blows a huge pink gum bubble, climbs into it and drifts away to play. The dominant theme is that all people are refreshed by play and a little "joie de vivre" is a necessary antidote to work. However, many other elements become part of the fantasy. Ellen's work-bedraggled father, Mr. McGrood, and a series of loosely involved friends and animals join the bubble party in the sky and escape a rescue by the town's most potent forces, somewhat

reminiscent of the townfolks' efforts to rescue *Mandy and her Flying Map*.² The bubbles burst on "sticky island" and an appeal is made to Granny to join them. Unfortunately, Salsberg's plot drifts like the bubbles and lacks both control and coherence: there is no connection between things that happen. At one point, for example, Ellen is looking for a river-snake which proves no particular threat and never in fact materializes. This has two results for the young children who are listening. One is that the continuous introduction of extraneous characters, playful as they are, makes the story confusing. Secondly, the arbitrariness and lack of connection between elements make it boring to the child because no tension is established. As well, there is no powerful emotional content drawing children inexorably into the story as in Munsch's books.

The emotional content in *Up in Bubbles* derives from the relationship between Ellen and two authority figures, her father, Mr. McGrood, and a dead Granny who is "up on the wall" immortalized in a photograph. (Granny plays somewhat the same role as Falada, the dead horse's head, in *The Goose Girl*.) The climax of the story is Granny's arrival on sticky island carrying "strawberries for nine" in her own full-blown bubble. On the final page when Ellen and Mr. McGrood are home, Granny is back in her photo on the wall with bubble gum on her face. This interfacing of reality and fantasy suggests the conventions of fairy tales. This does not harmonize with the depiction of the characters as homey rural folk in a landscape reminiscent of Prince Edward Island. Quite apart from this incongruity, the sophisticated play with symbols suggesting different levels of reality is much too confusing for a seven-year-old. Children do not adequately understand the difference between fantasy and reality until they are about nine years of age. Salsberg's writing and storyline need pruning and tightening to focus more on the bubble gum episode. Otherwise the central idea of the value of play is almost lost.

Salsberg's brown line drawings on oatmeal coloured paper have a sepia print look which derives both from the colours and from her delicate drawings and the use of areas of contrasting small patterns. Her draughtsmanship (do we have a non-sexist term for that one?) is precise and telling, and her use of empty space interesting and varied (See Figure 1). She conveys, for example, qualities of silence of noisily popping bubbles in her drawings. The illustrations are superb.

Suomalainen's illustrations for Munsch's books match the energy and vigour of the stories through the use of strong lines and (dare I say it?) garish colour. However, in contrast to Salsberg, his draughtsmanship is technically primitive, and I find his drawing of Jule Ann's face particularly troublesome. It's a relief to see these books are not sex-role stereotyped, but Jule Ann's nose looks positively phallic and the drawing of her teeth is simply inaccurate. Perhaps Suomalainen was attempting to draw as a child would draw, but the result is an unfortunate resemblance to a pumpkin in December (See Figure 2). Munsch's stories are like polished gems, so it is a disappointment to see them sloppily illustrated.

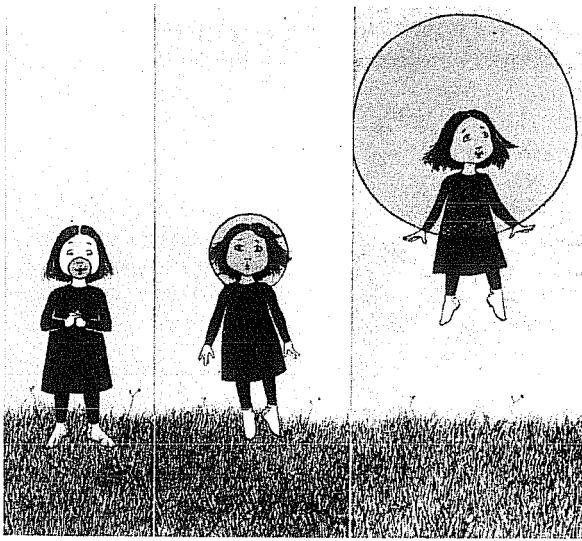


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Overall, Munsch's books are super stories for small children and will become standards in the repertoire of quality Canadian books. Salsberg's book will, I think, have little lasting impact on children, with the possible exception of the central image of rising in a bubble gum bubble. Sendak has remarked that creating picture books is like walking a tightrope because one slip in either the writing or the illustrations destroys the unity of the book.³ Munsch does not slip. Unfortunately, the format of Salsberg's book and its picture-to-text ratio suggest that it is a picture book for non-readers. Nevertheless, its symbolic elements and rambling story make it largely unsuitable for pre-schoolers and most appropriate for six to nine-year-olds. All three books have an appealing size and format; all are delightfully playful and not sex-stereotyped; all are quality productions which are a welcome addition to the library of Canadian books for young children.

NOTES

¹Beverley Allinson, *Mandy and her Flying Map*. Toronto, Women's Press, 1974.

²Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York, Vintage Books, 1977.

³Maurice Sendak, *New York Times Magazine*, 1974.

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Phantafelix

GAEL BLACKHALL

Catlands, Felix Vincent. Illus. by author. Tundra, 1977. 20 pp. \$9.95 cloth.

The Painted Cougar, Elisabeth Margaret Hopkins. Illus. by author. Talonbooks, 1977. Unpaged. \$7.95 cloth.