Interview with Frank Newfeld

LINDA GHAN

Frank Newfeld could well have stepped out of one of his own children's illustrations. You are greeted at the door of his studio by a short, slightly round man with rich, silvered hair, a bristly dark moustache, and warm hazel eyes that peer out under heavy black eyebrows. You are welcomed into the light and order of the rooms, and – with an accent that is hard to identify – he talks about his work enthusiastically, about himself easily.

When you learn of his varied background, the reasons for the accent become clear. The first nine years of his life were spent in Czechoslovakia. In 1937, his mother moved to Scotland to join her new husband. In 1947, when Frank was 19, the entire family moved to Canada. The following year, he was off to Israel as a war artist and remained in the area (more or less) until 1952 when he returned to England to study art. His final return to Canada was in 1954.

He considers himself a book designer who also does illustration. But that doesn't tell the whole story. He has been a theatre set designer, a cobbler, a war artist, an art director, a "funky" editor, teacher, and owner and manager of a boutique.

Whatever his own opinions of his status as an illustrator, his name has become a household word across Canada for his illustrations in the Newfeld-Lee books, Alligator Pie, Nicholas Knock, *and* Garbage Delight. *His credits in illustration include, in addition to perhaps a dozen trade books for children and adults, numerous educational books. In book design, there are well over six hundred titles:* The Taming of the Canadian West, The Canadian Indian, The Great Railways Illustrated, Forts of Canada. *His awards for both illustration and design total 149, and these come from New York, Chicago, Canada, Scotland, and Switzerland.*

Frank Newfeld spoke to Linda Ghan for Canadian Children's Literature *in his studio in Toronto on March 1, 1979.*

CCL: You've had quite a varied career.

F.N.: Yes. In fact, my first job as an artist in Canada was in a toy factory. I thought this would be rather super. I answered an ad for "Artist wanted in toy factory," and took a portfolio which the man didn't want to see. He took me up to the fourth floor in a freight elevator, gave me a trolley and four pots of paint – one with white paint and a large, pointed

brush, the second a pot with blue paint and a round brush, the third a pot with black paint and a round brush, and, finally, there was another pot with white paint and a tiny, little brush. Then he pointed me at rows of hundreds and hundreds of dolls – completely naked – and said, "Paint the eyes." I did it for two hours in the proper order: whites of eyes, blue cornea, black iris, and white highlight in the iris. I realized I was going to go crazy if I kept at that, so I switched the orders and started with the black brush. Black whites of eyes, white cornea, blue iris, black highlights. I got through half a row of dolls before I was discovered.

CCL: You have also been an art director and an editor.

F.N.: I went to McClelland and Stewart first as a consultant art director in 1957. But I still had my own studio. By 1970, I found myself vice-president of publishing, and I said, "My god, I'm not supposed to be doing this. I'm a designer." But I was pretty dead by then. I think I'd done some six hundred books, and I realized I needed a rest. So I quit completely, and my wife and I opened a boutique, which was about as far away from publishing as I could get.

CCL: What was the route that took you back to book design and illustration?

F.N.: Four years later, Jean Boggs from the National Gallery in Ottawa invited me up as publishing consultant one day a week. By that time, I was pretty sick of boutiques, I must confess. The job with the National Gallery was only supposed to be six months and turned into eighteen months. I left when Jean Boggs left at the time of the dispute in Ottawa. Slowly, but surely, I drifted back into design. McClelland and Stewart asked me to come back in a consultant role. Hugh Cane, then the president, sent me a manuscript of kids' poems and asked if I knew an illustrator who could do this. I thought hard about it and sent him three names. He phoned up and said he really didn't think he wanted to use any of those; did I know of anyone else? I said, "No, but, hell, I wouldn't mind doing it." Luckily, they couldn't afford to pay for the illustrations in *Alligator Pie* and asked me to go on a split royalty with Dennis Lee. They hadn't even asked me how much I wanted for the illustrations [in 1974, Macmillan of Canada published *Alligator Pie.*]

CCL: You've said that you don't think of yourself as an illustrator. Why not?

F.N.: I can with due modesty say I'm very good as a book designer, but I don't think I'm that good as an illustrator. I'm a designer, basically, by profession. I'd been educated in an English art school, and you couldn't be a designer unless you could draw, and you couldn't be an illustrator unless you could design. Here, the things are so divorced. I'm not that good at

illustration. It's a simple point of fact. I look at people like Brian Wildsmith, Morris Sendak, even Elizabeth Cleaver, and I say, "My god! If only I could do that!" I can't. I draw in a very tight style. Drawing doesn't come easily to me. I struggle with almost everything. I struggle if I have to draw a rectangle, and I struggle if I have to draw a person. I look at these other people, going back to the Beardsleys and the Rackhams. I'm quite convinced that they drew with ease and facility, and I don't.

CCL: To what do you attribute the success of the three Lee-Newfeld books?

F.N.: Knowing well my marvellous skills as an illustrator, I can honestly say that the success of the three books lies in Dennis Lee's poems. It's as simple as that. I have no illusions whatsoever. His poetry is an entirely different approach to children. It's exciting; it's a little bit risqué; you don't have to stand in awe of it. I am quite convinced that with another illustrator, Dennis Lee would have done very, very well. But I have to say to myself that it would have definitely sold five thousand less if I hadn't done it, because, after all, you know . . . .

CCL: Did you design the books as well?

F.N.: Sure, I designed them. That's my trade. I'm not going to let someone mess up illustrations that can't bear to be messed up. I have to give them all the help I can get. I design all my own books except the adult book, *Grasshopper*, a book on psychology which I'm doing now for the University of Toronto Press.

CCL: Do you and Dennis Lee work closely together?

F.N.: Dennis and I fight before each book. We work completely apart. That's one of my conditions. I like his poetry, and I like Dennis as a person; I hate Dennis as an art director, and I'm sure he feels the same about me as a poetry editor. It is impossible to work with an author because my imagery will be so far removed from what he sees, that it is going to bug him terribly. Luckily, I have a clause in my contract which protects me from that. I like to work with a good editor – I really think it is essential to work with a good editor who will have objectivity.

CCL: How did *Alligator Pie Calendar* come about?

F.N.: It was the idea of Bob Stewart of McClelland and Stewart. It started off supposedly as a spinoff, and they wanted to use those illustrations from inside the book. I thought the idea was super, and I wished I'd thought of it myself, but said, "No, there's no way we're just going to do a spin-off. Why the hell should they buy something that they've already got at home?" I said I wanted to do entirely new illustrations. Since

it was a royalty arrangement, it didn't matter too much to Macmillan. Dennis did four new poems, finally, but he did run poetry from the books. But that I think is different. Kids can become involved with the poetry because they read it, but with illustrations, they just look at the things. Why should they look at something for a whole month that they've already seen?

CCL: Are you going to pursue this kind of thing further? For instance, there are now Beatrix Potter dishes, Beatrix Potter cookbooks . . . .

F.N.: We're doing another calendar for next year. But as far as other spinoffs are concerned, we were approached about an *Alligator Pie* game by a Canadian game company, and considered it fairly seriously, and then said no. I wouldn't mind, myself, seeing a bunch of T-shirts with alligators on them – as long as my family didn't wear them. Dennis is very guarded. He doesn't want to overcommercialize, and I have to respect that. To me, it doesn't matter that much; I don't consider these things sacrosanct at all. I suppose it's because he's a serious poet who's gone into children's poetry which he considers serious, but which is sometimes stupidly placed by people on a different level from "poetry".

CCL: I notice a copy of Leonard Cohen's *Spice Box of Earth* which you illustrated.

F.N.: It was part of a series of books published in a limited edition. It was my idea. There were half a dozen books in the series. Macmillan decided which books should go into the series. Macmillan published for free; the paper company provided paper for free; the printer printed for free; I illustrated for free; and then, we decided proportionately, how much each effort was worth and we divied up the net receipt of each book that was sold. But really, nobody made any money at it, and we weren't supposed to. But, remember, this was at a time when publishing poetry was like publishing a book with blank pages. You can sell both now, but you couldn't then. But the fact that these books were turned out rather beautifully – I'm not talking illustrations; I'm talking book-making – did cause quite a lot of excitement, and we sold quite a few books in this country.

CCL: What prompted you to write your own two children's stories, *The Princess of Tomboso* and *Simon and the Golden Sword*?

F.N.: It's not completely true. I didn't write *Princess*; I adapted it. It's a folk-tale. I was very friendly with Bill Toye of Oxford University Press. He wanted to reissue *The Golden Phoenix* and wanted me to illustrate it. I said, "No, but I wouldn't mind doing one of the stories out of it." He said, "Try *Princess*, and we'll publish it." *Simon*. . . I was genuinely interested in Canadian folklore and had worked with Edith Fowke on a couple of books. The thing that bothered me terribly was that folklorists were collecting and squirreling away this Canadianized European – but definitely Canadian – – lore. It was in Bell's Corners in Ottawa, which is the Museum of Man,

put in learned books for other folklorists to enjoy, and the kids never got to it. I approached the Canada Council for a senior grant, and managed to put out *Simon.*

CCL: Did you have to do a lot of research for the story?

F.N.: *Simon* is a folk-tale I found at Bell's Corners. I went through a lot of musty archives. I had to wade through an awful lot of folklore structure because it became obvious to me that Wilmot McDonald had confused three folk-tales and shoved them together. There seems to be a very definite sequence of cause and effect, and there's an awful lot of symbolism in folk-tales. The way he told it, the story didn't quite jibe; there wasn't a proper link for some of the sequences. So, with the help of Bill Toye, I bastardized just to get cause and effect.

CCL: What about research for illustrations?

F.N.: I'd done an awful lot of history books, *The Taming of the Canadian West, The Canadian Indian, The Great Railway Illustrated, Forts of Canada.* Then, for many years – every one of us has a nasty hobby of some sort – I became intrigued with military uniforms up to the 19th century. I have a collection of miniature soldiers that I used to buy from England unpainted and paint myself. I've always been interested in history. And, if you remember, I started out as a stage designer, and of course, to become a stage designer, they really put us through it. We studied history of costume, and history of costume, and history of costume. That's stood me in good stead ever since. So the illustrations are fairly true. They stay with the genre of the time; the clothing is accurate. Although, in my fairy-tales, I don't mind skipping centuries. It annoys me when it's done accidentally, but I really don't mind when it's done for effect.

CCL: What art training do you actually have?

F.N.: I had a long, arduous art training. I started at Brighton College, which is the equivalent of the community colleges here. I spent a couple of years at Brighton. The best theatre teacher at the time was a man called Pollunin at the Slade School of Art. I was accepted at the Slade, but Pollunin was never there. In three weeks, I never saw him, so I left. I then went to Central School of Arts and Crafts in England because it had the Cochran Theatre then and was the best school for stage design. There was an interruption while I was a war artist in the middle east. I really had no business being a war artist, because I wasn't nearly good enough. Then I went back to Central to finish up. In between, I spent one summer working at Atelier Dix-Sept in Paris, an experimental print shop.

CCL: What took you from stage design to book design?

F.N.: Two things. First of all, my sets weren't structurally sound. One set actually collapsed on me. I had been warned by the carpenters, by everyone, that it wasn't going to work, but I insisted that it would. There was a

balcony, and slowly but surely – thank god there was nobody on it – it bent its way over during dress rehearsal. The other thing was that there was very little work in stage design at the time, and I was just frustrated at not getting any work. I knew that I wanted to do something visual. So – book design.

CCL: There's a theory that art schools ruin artists. Do you think your art training helped you?

F.N.: Remember, I'm a hack. I'm a commercial creature. I can't discuss this with you on the level of painting or sculpture, but as far as the communication arts are concerned, yes, there are definite things that have to be learned. An illustrator needs to draw as well or better than a painter, because the illustrator might be asked to illustrate a book on elephants, and tomorrow be asked to illustrate a book on furniture, and the day after be asked to illustrate a folk-tale, and there's no reason he shouldn't be able to. He must have the technical dexterity to be able to tackle all this, whether he abstracts or not, and that has to be taught. Now, let's go to what I do best, which is book design. There are an awful lot of technical things that you need to learn for colour process, for reproduction, for what different paper does. Yes, you can learn from experience, but who the heck is going to trust you if you've never designed a book before and they're going to print twenty thousand of them? Who's going to let you experience it if you use the wrong paper? It's far better if you learn in the environment of a professional. A pica is not just 12 points and there are six of them to an inch – there is the use of different sizes of type, and the psychology of type face, and so on.

CCL: You've won a number of awards for your illustrations.

F.N.: Yes, but not in Canada. All of my awards are outside of Canada. In the last two years, I got a Bronze Medal at the International Book Fair in Leipzig; I got an award in New York. In Chicago, I got two awards, one for the Innuit Catalogue for the Museum of Man, and Peter Desbarats *The Night the City Sang* got an Award of Distinction. Admittedly, there was one Canadian award, the Ruth Schwartz Booksellers' Award for *Garbage Delight*. It's a Booksellers' award, which probably means *Garbage* sold the most books, not that it's the best book. But, no, in general, in Canada . . . . I submitted *Alligator, Nicholas,* and *Garbage Delight* to one show, and they didn't pick it.

CCL: Is there any one of your children's books that you feel works the best? That you are happiest with?

F.N.: I looked at *Princess of Tomboso* about a month ago. I did that in 1960. There are a couple of pages which are pretty awful, but, on the whole, that seems to work for me. The others are too recent. I can't get perspective on them. I just know that I hate every one of them at the moment. There are individual drawings that I don't mind, but there are such ghastly mistakes in

them. Generally speaking, with someone else's book which you have to illustrate, the publisher will come to you some six months before the book is meant to be printed and bound and you usually finish up having three months to work. Sometimes four months. It just isn't enough time. I'm not complaining. It's just a fact of life, but I lack the professional skill to work at that speed.

CCL: Have you done research to find out what children like in illustrations?

F.N.: Early on in the game, when I started on *Alligator* and *Nicholas*, I got my sons to take some drawings around to the kids in the neighbourhood. They came back saying, "This seems to be O.K. This isn't." I didn't do it myself, because there is a limit to kids' honesty. If your son brings it to them, they will quite happily say, "Ah, your Dad can't draw." Since then, I've made at least fifty, sixty appearances and done readings with children as far east as Ontario, but as far west as Vancouver, and I've met lots and lots of kids, sometimes under excellent conditions. After readings, there was time to chat, and they're very honest.

CCL: Have you always had positive reactions?

F.N.: The kids are very nice, but they'll tell you if they dislike something – in a pleasant way. They think I'm absolutely super. I read some of Dennis's poems, and I do instant drawings. But I cheat outrageously. I keep drawing the same things, and they don't know that. I can draw an alligator in about thirty seconds flat, and he looks pretty damn good. Once in a while, I wax ambitious, and because of my drawing disability, I make a complete ass of myself, which the kids like very much and accept. They know their own failures. They know that they can get 95% on a math paper one day and 35% on another day because on that particular day, they didn't understand. So they accept it. They also communicate as a result of it. A kid will be able to say to you, "Never mind. You didn't draw that one very well, but the others are super." Your publisher usually says, "Oh, my god! Look at this illustration! He's losing his touch!"

CCL: Do you find that children from one end of the country to the other have similar reactions?

F.N.: The parallel we once drew between a child from Oakville and a small community out west, say Weyburn, and a child from Winnipeg and from Toronto, the two latter being from a metropolis and the former from a rural community. . . Well, that's not true. I found the children in Winnipeg completely different from the children in Toronto. They were similar in Calgary to Edmonton, but they were different in Calgary from Winnipeg. They like different things; they respond to different things. I'll give you an example. In Winnipeg, I did two readings last November, and thank heavens, because the morning reading was just a disaster. Many of the tried and true things that made the kids respond in Ontario just went

flat. Thank heavens I had two hours between performances. I just switched everything around. Poems that I did, certain drawings that I had done which always evoke a kind of response here just went over like a lead balloon, so I abandoned those. For instance, there is a poem called "In Kamloops." "In Kamloops, I'll eat your boots / In Winnipeg, I'll eat your legs . . . ." and so on. Here in Ontario, the libraries shake when I do that because I'm very noisy, and I race around grabbing kids by different parts of their anatomy – always careful not to be labelled a dirty old man. In Winnipeg, it just went flat.

CCL: How many children do you have?

F.N.: Two, I think. Philip, whose car burned this morning, is 19. David is now 17.

CCL: Did you write or draw for them when they were young?

F.N.: When Philip was born, I was so amazed at having a child, that I actually went to the trouble of designing a typeface. I designed an alphabet with decorative initials, which a publisher in New York was interested in. But it never dawned on me to illustrate a book for them. *Simon and the Golden Sword* I dedicated to my wife simply because she put up with a hell of a lot while it was going on, and it was my way of saying, "I'm sorry for the mess I caused."

CCL: You have been accused of "sidestepping" in your illustrations.

F.N.: Let's say I'd like to round out the picture. I don't do definitive illustrations. I don't parrot the word of the poet at all. If he verbally paints, there is absolutely no sense at all in my visually painting the same thing. I would be interpreting him, and my interpretation may be far removed from the child's interpretation. So I sidestep on purpose, so the child can say, "Hey, this is interesting. That's not the way I see it, but I can still see it in my own way." I think the correct way of illustrating for kids is not to close off. I usually amble in a parallel path.

CCL: What kinds of things have you found that children like in illustrations?

F.N.: They like lots and lots of things to discover. They like certain forms of colour, though there is no colour ban. And there are certain taboos which are silly taboos.

CCL: What do you mean by "things they can discover"?

F.N.: Supposing I have a scene in *Simon* of a bunch of soldiers chasing poor Simon, and here I'll have a drawing of fifteen soldiers. Instead of making them all the same, which may be more effective in an illustration for adults, I'll try and vary each and every one of them, and have personal little histories appearing in each drawing. They'll be doing different things: some will look quizzical, someone's hat will be flying off . . . .

CCL: What colour forms don't they like?

F.N.: They will accept the wildest fancies of colour. You don't have to be true to nature with them. They will also accept monochromatic illustrations. Something tells them that they only had two colours and if the illustration is only in black and green, they'll accept green on a person's face. They dislike that, though. They say, "This is silly." And it is. The illustrator could have used another colour. What does annoy children is inconsistent use of colour – if, for example, the illustrator moved into a colour abstraction in one area and he hasn't in another.

CCL: What about those "silly taboos"?

F.N.: For instance, we're supposedly not allowed to chop off a figure in a children's book illustration. Our librarians tell us that, and our authorities on children tell us that – that it frightens them, that they become confused. You cannot draw half a man in the foreground. I'm not sure that this is correct and true. Once in a while, I find myself in a situation with an illustration where it's a pain in the ass not to draw half a figure; the composition demands it. The kids seem to have accepted it. They seem to realize that there is more to come. Possibly this taboo is for children who live in houses with no windows, and have never seen half a figure chopped off by a window pane.

CCL: What do you think about violence in children's stories?

F.N.: I'm not opposed to violence as long as it isn't the Walt Disney kind of violence where violence doesn't have any frightening result because people fall off precipices and pick themselves up right away. I think violence is violence and one presents it, but I think one can present it in such a way that the child must disagree with the violence, rather than, "This is it, and it's what we all have to do." I think that the ogres we present to a child are valid. I suspect Andersen and Grimm and all the others have prevented countless murders just by letting the kids experience the violence in that particular environment.

CCL: What about violence in illustrations?

F.N.: If you look at some of Sendak's illustrations where the monsters are, they are monsters, and they are not desirable bedmates, by any means. Yet you cannot be terribly scared of them. They are so much Sendak's, that yours can be someone else's.

CCL: Do you have a preference for the kind of story you illustrate? Do you prefer a story of fantasy to a realistic story?

F.N.: Oh, fantasy, for sure. I don't like to do realistic stories at all.

CCL: What about in poetry?

F.N.: With poems, one responds differently. You have more leeway not

to be realistic, even if the poem is about the same subject as the story. I respond with fantasy.

CCL: Do you find it easier to illustrate your own stories?

F.N.: My own stories – *Simon* and *Princess* weren't really my own stories. They were stories that I found, so, again, I was responding to someone else's imagination.

CCL: Why did you choose those particular stories? *Simon*, for instance.

F.N.: I was planning to do at least four stories when I did *Simon*, but the Canada Council only gave me a small part of the grant I had asked for, so I didn't have the bread to do more. Simon was the first that I found that I had a strong response to.

CCL: What do you mean by "a strong response"?

F.N.: I responded to it visually while I was reading it. I could visualize the characters and the situations.

CCL: Your figures are always completed in your drawings for children. Do you have a particular theory for that?

F.N.: It's my style. Or one of my styles. I respond that way. But in the book on psychology that I'm doing now for adults, I've responded differently. In *Grasshopper*, the illustrations are rather wild.

CCL: Some of your illustrations are what some people believe to be "adult", a breast showing, for instance . . . .

F.N.: I don't think you should do things differently for children. Women have breasts. I think to hide breasts is a hangover, and it only serves to make sex dirty for children, instead of making it natural. Then we turn out adults for whom sex is dirty. I don't go in for the Walt Disney kind of thing where a mermaid is swimming through the water with a garland of flowers hanging around her neck. It would be damned difficult to swim that way, for one thing, and those flowers would get awfully soggy. I don't have her sitting on a rock with her hair hanging down over her breasts, either, unless her hair would fall that way naturally.

CCL: The characters you illustrate have so much personality. There is a whole story in the expressions of the rabbit family in "Peter Rabbit" in *Alligator Pie*.

F.N.: That's because I can't draw what a rabbit really looks like. So I draw them looking mean, or angry, or mischievous.

CCL: Some of the poems in the Lee-Newfeld books have more impact because of your illustrations. "Peter was a Pilot" in *Garbage Delight* suggests a much fuller story.

F.N.: I combined the stories of the two poems "Peter was a Pilot" and

"Quintin and Griffin" into the illustration. In fact, if you look closely, you'll see that the pilot is me and Quintin standing on the shore is Dennis Lee. But there, you're scaring me. I don't want the illustration to come between the poem and the reader. In fact, as an illustrator of my own story, I often got annoyed with myself as an illustrator. It was as if the illustrator was saying, "Well, you're not a very good writer."

CCL: Do you see fantasy having a specific role for children?

F.N.: Definitely. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say that if we had more of the Hans Christian Andersen fantasy for children, we'd have less violence among adults. That's on the negative side. On the positive side, if we had more fantasy for children, we'd have adults who were more alive, who had more imagination.

CCL: Do you choose colours that promote fantasy?

F.N.: No. I just respond that way. I do like subdued colours in other people's illustrations, but I like – or perhaps I should say I'm more comfortable – using strong colours, so I use them in children's illustrations.

CCL: Do you design the page for a poem first, or do you do the illustration for the poem first?

F.N.: They happen at the same time. I see the kind of type, the placing of the illustration. Of course, what comes on the preceding page also makes a difference.

CCL: Who decides the order of the poems?

F.N.: Dennis Lee. With some leeway, of course. The rhythm of the whole book is important, and I would hate to tamper with that.

CCL: Have you found that children prefer a lot of realistic detail rather than abstract illustration?

F.N.: Don't confuse realistic with naturalistic. This is the thing. You don't need to be naturalistic in children's illustrations. In fact, I think it's an obstacle if you are. I don't think you need even hold up a tinted mirror to nature in kids' books. Take people like Tommy Ungerer, who draw wildly stylistic things. That's fine. I'm concerned sometimes by abstraction being used to avoid formulating an idea. It's not a liberator. It confines. So, although I say you don't need to be realistic, I suspect that the abstract becomes confusing.

CCL: Have you found black and white, or colour illustrations to be more effective in illustrations for children?

F.N.: There are all kinds of theories, but I'm convinced in my own mind that in the final analysis, colour is more effective. But, the economy of publishing being what it is, we very often have to work in black and white,

or two colours, and it can be made as effective. Look at Sendak's drawings. They're all black and white. Sometimes he uses colour, but very light washes. But, instinctively, I would say, yes, a colourful kids' book.

CCL: Is there any medium you prefer to work in? Oils? Watercolours?

F.N.: I never use oils. They take too long to dry. I grab whatever comes to hand. I use coloured pencils. I use inks. Most of the time, in the kids' paintings, I use marvellous acrylics. They're super. They give you the quality of oil; they dry fast; they're easy to use – if you're hamfisted, they're terrific. But watercolours are very different. You have to be very good to use watercolours. I can use them. But they look a mess.

CCL: Do you use live models for your children's illustrations?

F.N.: Sometimes. Only if I just cannot resolve a certain pose. Most of the time I can fight my way through. But once in a while, there is a certain pose, and rather than give up on the pose and say, "Well, I'll use something I know," I impose on family, or a friend. I never draw from a photograph. This has become a whole new scene. If I wanted that sort of thing, I'd use a photograph.

CCL: Have you every done any film animation?

F.N.: No. That's the first short answer.

CCL: Do you want to?

F.N.: No.

CCL: Children's illustrations seem to be becoming more respectable in Canada, partly because of your work.

F.N.: Maybe. But realize, we don't have a tradition of children's literature. Take the Scandinavians, the Slavic countries, the United States, England . . . the top people illustrate children's books. The whole gamut, from Ronald Scerl, to Pasconi, Milton Glazier, Brian Wildsmith. Here, the economics are against it unless you desperately want to do a children's book at that particular time, or you're an eternal optimist. Top people here won't do it, and they're not asked to do it. I can't blame the publisher.

CCL: What are the economics of it?

F.N.: Let's take a kids' book. Now we pay $7.95. Let's call it $8. If they have a good sale, they'll sell about five thousand. Most kids' books don't sell. This one hundred twenty thousand plus for *Alligator Pie* – that's a freak thing. So the gross is five times eight, $40,000 at the booksellers. The bookseller gets approximately 40%, so now the publisher gets $24,000. A book in that size run will probably cost $10,000 or $12,000 to produce if it's in colour. Colour separation is expensive. That leaves $12,000. If the illustrator gets 10%, he's going to get $4,000. But you've got to pay the author something. So it's $2,000. A black and white illustration

commercially is $200. A single full-colour illustration is $400. Suppose that we took the $400 for a single full-colour illustration; that means I can do five illustrations for a children's book, hoping that it will sell. So, unless you desperately want to do a children's book, there is no reason to do it. And that's not an indictment. There's nothing to say that the top artists should, that they owe a duty.

CCL: Are the economics better in, for example, the United States?

F.N.: It's not that different from Canada except for one thing. A children's book there is published in a run of twenty thousand. That's pretty damn good in the States. They know that the libraries are going to buy sixteen thousand of the twenty thousand. (That's the minimum they can expect.) They only have to sell four thousand. We don't sell less, strangely enough. But with us, we print five thousand. As far as library purchase is concerned, four hundred and fifty is not untoward. Now, whereas in the States, the libraries consume 80% of the run, and the private sector consumer 20%, here the private sector is expected to consume 80%, and the libraries take 20%. That's the main problem.

CCL: You've worked a great deal as a free-lancer. Do you prefer that?

F.N.: Yes. I wasn't a bad company man, but although it wasn't particularly unpleasant for me, it was hellish for everyone else. I'm not easy to work with. I have very definite ideas. I like to think that I did it originally because I wanted to gain respect – or something like that – but I really think it's just because I'm a bastard. At least, I'm told that my standards are unrealistic. There was a look at McClelland and Stewart when I was art director that was unusual for a Canadian publishing house, and I was determined that would happen. Sometimes it was very hard to do.

CCL: What do you make your living from?

F.N.: A little bit of this, a little bit of that. Mostly book design. I'm lucky, I guess, that I'm supposedly able to put a coffee table book together. Take a thirty dollar book. The publisher has got to sell twenty thousand of them to make it a viable proposition; the gross, if they do sell, is about $600,000 – well over half a million dollars. Naturally, they're going to try and protect it, and that's where I come in. I can put a coffee table book together from the idea. I'll tell them how many words it should be, I'll tell them the format, and I'll tell them how many pages it should have.

CCL: What about children's illustrations?

F.N.: You can't make a living at it. Admittedly, we're lucky with *Alligator* and *Nicholas* and *Garbage Delight*. There is a revenue each year which is not inconsequential. But that was just sheer luck. Neither *Princess*, nor *Simon*, nor the last book with Peter Desbarats, *The Night the City Sang*, is producing anything at all. Not that illustration is a hobby. It hasn't reached the point where, for an illustration, I pull out solution 17b.

CCL: Do you work a certain number of hours a day here in your studio? I have the impression that you do not wait to be inspired.

F.N.: Yes, I put in a day's work. Sometimes long hours, seldom short ones, and I'm not always inspired. Take a look over there, and you'll see a cupboard, and there are all kinds of red labels. Those are all the different jobs that are in the studio at the moment. I like six jobs in the studio at any one time. Oh, I die on a job, of course, just as anyone else does, but I don't sit and cry. I move on to the next shelf and get going.

CCL: Do you do all your work on the board?

F.N.: No, I don't work on the board, as most illustrators do. Instead of doing three hundred and forty-eight thumbnail sketches to come up with an idea, I work in reverse; I first verbalize my illustrations and write notes to myself. I have a composition in my head. I know what's going to go into it. I stay with an idea doggedly. If I think that it's a good idea, then that's what's going to appear in the illustration. My only battle is how to make it appear. So I come to the board pretty well knowing what I'm going to do.

CCL: Do you have writers approaching you to illustrate their books?

F.N.: At least six manuscripts a year arrive. I don't read them; I don't look at them; I send them back. I've been in publishing and the worst thing a writer can do, absolutely the very worst, is to come to a publisher with an illustrated manuscript. Unless it's their own, of course, then they're selling the whole thing. Whilst I was at McClelland and Stewart – not while I was art director, but when I was at the publishing end of it – I wanted my input as a publisher, from a merchandising point of view, into the packaging of the book. As I said earlier, it needs a very professional editor who is objective to decide how, what, and why a book should be published. The editor is there to help. Nobody writes clean copy. That's why we have editors in this world. They don't just proof-read. A proof-reader does that. Now, the writer must accept the fact that he or she is going to be edited, and, very often, heavily edited; – if writers can accept that, why do they think they can be art directors, where even an editor has to lean heavily on an art director? Most authors who haven't been published will go to friends or someone who's close. I'm sure they don't all have a file of illustrators at hand, while an art director together with an editor will go through a list and perhaps consider thirty illustrators. Sending a manuscript to an illustrator is an imposition. If he's a professional, he won't do it, and, in any case, he won't work on speculation.

CCL: How do young illustrators start out? Do they take a portfolio to publishers?

F.N.: That's exactly what they do. You pound the pavement – everything and anything. The most important thing is to get published. The printed sample. It's a funny thing. You can have a portfolio of the most

delightful illustrations, but a dozen of them is not as effective as one printed sample.

CCL: Why is that?

F.N.: Because then we know that they've been under fire. We don't know from a portfolio. Have they drawn this because this particular thing is close to them? Or is this just a response, the same way they would respond to a manuscript that a publisher has given them? It may well be that the portfolio is the limit, not of their ability, but of their interest at the moment.

CCL: What advice would you give a young illustrator if he or she wanted to get into children's books?

F.N.: First of all, get a vocabulary of illustrators. See what's being done. Look at lots of books. See who the top names are. Don't draw like them, by any means, but keep up to date on your profession. You've got to read before you can write; why you shouldn't have to look at drawings before you can illustrate is always beyond me. History of art. They should know that. Then the best thing they can do if they want to get into kids' illustration is to take a published children's story. Don't take one written by a friend, unpublished, because the editor's not going to know it. Neither is the art director, and he doesn't want to slog through it. But supposing you take one of Grimm's fairytales, which is known and recognizable. Do three or four illustrations for it and shove those into your portfolio. Then they'll see something specific that's illustrated. They'll be able to relate to it. I've gone the route. I am a designer; I've been an art director; I've been an illustrator; I've been an editor – not at the word-a-day end, but the conceptual end. As an art director, I'd rather see a portfolio of a dozen pieces which were really good, which were germane, with a definite progression so that a change of pace is explained, and left hungry for more, than go through a whole slough and be bored.

CCL: I've heard that different folks require different portfolios.

F.N.: When I first started, I actually had three portfolios, and that's terribly important. I had a portfolio which I used when an agency called. In that portfolio, I had ads for BOAC, EEA and E.B. Eddy, and that's what I showed. I didn't show children's illustrations. They weren't interested in that. I had a portfolio of design that I did if I wanted to get the proper image job. For instance, I did the symbol for the Royal Ontario Museum, but, again, there's no sense in showing that to a children's book publisher. Then I had a publishing portfolio, because I didn't think that the publisher looking at children's illustrations would be interested in the fact that I could draw an ROM and put a crown on top and that the Royal Ontario Museum was using it.

CCL: What kind of helpful advice can a young illustrator expect from an art director of a publishing company?

F.N.: You'll never get no's. They'd say, "This is charming work. I love it. As soon as I have something, I'll call you."

CCL: Why?

F.N.: Because it's easier. Even I stopped being completely honest. I used to spend forty-five minutes with young people. Sometimes I would quite honestly say, "Look, go back to art school. You've got talent, but you're not there yet." Sometimes, even, "Why? Why are you doing this? It's not at a professional level." I had a few scenes of people saying, "Who the hell do you think you are?" Quite right, too. But I persevered until one girl really let me have it. There really wasn't anything there, as far as I could see – certainly not at the level that was expected at the time. She really let me have it. I was shaken for two days. Since then, I've said, "Oh, that's very interesting. I'll let you know." In self-defence. Incidentally, that's another piece of advice: if an art director tells you that your work is interesting, it means he doesn't like it.

CCL: In addition to the six jobs you have in your studio, you are also teaching book illustration at Sheridan College.

F.N.: I used to teach at the Ontario College of Art for quite a few years, and I gave it up just before Centennial. I like teaching. It's interesting. You are forced to verbalize, and in verbalizing, you suddenly begin to analyze again. I think that everyone in the profession has a specific path to follow. When they are very young, they should be unseating old people like me who've been around for a long time. At least, they should have a jolly good go at it. Hopefully, I can look after myself. If I can't, I deserve to be unseated. Then, they should develop a philosophy in the style, in the look, and in the feel, of their own; they should make a contribution if they are good. Then they should begin to nurture those people who should unseat them again. When I went to school in England, I had people like Edward Bawden, Laurence Scarfe, Anthony Gross, Ruskin Spear, Tony Flosuagh, Herbert Spencer. These were all the top men in their field who came to teach. I think that definitely should be done by more people. To tell the honest truth, it's super. It's good for my ego if I can get a whole bunch of pretty twenty-year-old girls, and even attractive twenty-year-old men, hanging on every word I say. But, mainly, yes, teaching's something we should do. Absolutely.

CCL: Are there any children's writers you'd like to work with?

F.N.: There are a few. Easily number one is Margaret Laurence. I wouldn't like to work with Peggy Atwood on a children's book because I think she could illustrate her own. She draws quite nicely. W.O. Mitchell. Susan Musgrave. Pierre Berton. Farley Mowat. I would love to work on a book with Farley Mowat. Apart from my respect for him as a writer, he is a most charming person, understands publishing, and would realize that he would get to see what I did after it was done, not whilst it was going on.

CCL: These are not necessarily names in children's literature.

F.N.: I don't think you need an entirely different breed for kid lit. It always makes me a little suspicious. I could talk about Edith Fowke, I suspect that Edith couldn't write a book. She's an anthologist. Also, I have a funny feeling that kid lit – I hate to use this awful word – is important enough that it should engender the contribution of the top authors in our country.

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