

Good Things from the Small Presses

JUDITH CARSON

The Spaghetti Word Race, Frank Etherington. Illus. by Gina Calleja. Annick Press, 1981. 28 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-11-1.

Wondrous Tales of Wicked Winston, Linda Manning. Illus. by Barbara Eidlitz. Annick Press, 1981. 42 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-92236-18-9.

The Christmas Snowmobile, Marlene Moore. Illus. by John Myćka. Highway Book Shop, 1977. 28 pp. \$2.50 paper.

Publishing books for children would not be classified as a growth industry by the Bay Street brokers in Toronto, but according to statistics in a 1981 Discover catalogue produced by The Children's Book Centre, Toronto, the number of children's books written and published in Canada is getting bigger and better each year. This is true of both English and French books, although the Book Centre's statistics are based on English publications only. In 1977 Canada published 94 children's books and more than 200 in 1980. Some of these have been translated into Japanese, German, Italian, Russian and Finnish. Although Canada publishes about a sixteenth the number of children's books as does the U.K. or the U.S., the publishing houses who produce most of the Canadian fare are finding not only a growing interest at home, but also abroad. At the 1981 Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, and the Children's Book Fair in Bologna, Italy, Canadian publishers found some of the Europeans were giving their manuscripts first consideration in the search for new material.

More children's books are being published partly because a growing number of small presses have taken up the cause of publishing children's books. Financially, the major publishing houses cannot afford to take the risk of presenting unknown authors who may not sell, so a few dedicated people have started shoestring operations to fill the gap. These small businesses have taken root and are thriving in their own modest way.

Some, like Annick, Kids Can, Tree Frog and Three Trees are devoting all their efforts to children's literature. Annick Press for instance, will produce nine books this year.

But the books from small presses vary in quality. The three samples under review here, published by two of these small presses, show both the achievements and the perils in this kind of publishing.

Both *The Spaghetti Word Race* and *Wondrous Tales of Wicked Winston* are from Annick Press who have managed to team up artists and writers who complement one another skilfully. In *The Spaghetti Word Race*, Jacob, the protagonist, is an imaginative little boy, who seriously ponders the mechanics of one of our daily household wonders, the telephone. Specifically, he imagines that he can see words travelling along the telephone lines like so much spaghetti being squeezed through the wires. Young children have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, and the transport of human voices along telephone wires is one of the daily mysteries that few adults understand, so that Jacob's charming explanation provides a challenge to experimental science.

This is a story about children for children which employs a direct style, simple English, and clear dialogue to tell a story that incorporates action, plot and subtle lessons in social behaviour. Frank Etherington's reporter's instinct for detail and observation of action make his story come alive when it is read aloud. Because Jacob has a vivid imagination, fantasy and fact become a bit confused. But Jacob needs to be shown serious consideration for his ingenuity, and his older sister provides this necessary tolerance and support.

Gina Calleja's artwork provides realistic and warm graphics which enhance the story line, but in no way take over. The visualization of the abstract idea in the story will help young readers to grasp the story and imagine along with Jacob.

The story and pictures are based in an easily recognizable setting and all children, like Jacob, may have difficulty understanding the way in which voices are transmitted along telephone wires. Although this mystery is never resolved, the story has a very satisfactory ending, because Jacob has learned a lesson about the consequences of exaggerating and trying to save face.

In *Wondrous Tales of Wicked Winston*, Linda Manning uses verse, long a favourite method of telling tales of fantasy voyages. Manning, who is also a children's playwright and amateur actor, uses her sense of rhythm and music to create a chanting poem about a naughty wizard and his feline accomplice. The story is not scary, but fun. Winston is a mischievous, cranky wizard who can fly about in the dark. He causes chaos among unsuspecting summer campers in his first adventure, and loots a ghost ship in his second.

There is no likelihood that children will be encouraged to steal or imitate this fantastic pair because they bear slight resemblance to real life and their thefts border on the ludicrous. The humour comes from the stealth and trouble they go to in order to steal such mundane items as:

A flashlight red, an old felt hat,
A fishing rod, a rubber boot.
 Rubber boot –
 What a hoot!

The second adventure of Wicked Winston, the pillaging of a ghost ship around Halloween, is pure fantasy. The ship is visited by the pair at full moon, and the treasure they take is not the gold they find in the Captain's cabin, but the trunk they find it in.

The idea of a wizard and a cat living in a sand dune house on the shore of Lake Erie, flying about in an "empty turtle shell" propelled by a "moonbeam net" on the night of a full moon, is bound to fascinate children. The rollicking verse form and persistent rhyme scheme may be a bit grating to an adult reader, but when read aloud, they are fun. The imagery is provocative. The story has been read in schools and libraries in a number of southern Ontario locations, large and small, to very enthusiastic audiences. Linda Manning's experience as an elementary school teacher and mother of three children helps her pick what will appeal to children.

Barbara Eidlitz's black and white drawings of a lanky Winston, who looks like a male witch, and a feisty Winnie, his cat companion, are great. Winston is rather sinister-looking due to his large dark glasses, large black hat and shapeless black cloak, while Winnie is a contrast in white, just to eliminate any further bad press for black cats.

My chief criticism of this first work for Linda Manning has to do with the production of the book. It could be bigger in size, print and drawings. It is a bit dainty for the subject matter and the audience it is directed at. Unfortunately, the paper marks easily, especially the black, a minor drawback for a book that will be passed around a lot and may not stand up to this use, unless it is treated carefully.

The Christmas Snowmobile by Marlene Moore is published by the Highway Bookshop. Like Linda Manning, Marlene Moore has used verse form, this time to tell a modern tale about one of the best loved people in a child's world, Santa Claus. It is the sad story of a Christmas when the reindeer all become ill with flu.

A dispirited Santa scoffs at helper Elmo's proposal to convert his sleigh into a snowmobile. But the elves work all night and most of the next day to have the snowmobile ready for Santa.

The story is certainly suitable to a wintry country where snowmobiles are familiar vehicles and the flu a common ailment. But the way it is written is forced, meter and rhyme being distorted to fit into the verse form and meter of the well known "Twas the Night Before Christmas". Marlene Moore would have served her original story better with an original meter and less contrived rhyme scheme. The biographical notes state that the author is a professional musician, composer and teacher. An original song, "Elmo's Song", is tucked in on the last page of the book, but it seems silly and out of place. It appears that the author was unable to decide whether she wanted to write a poem, a story, a play or a musical, and consequently created a compromise that has the ingredients for all of them, but is unable to blend them harmoniously.

The story would be enjoyed most by young children, but it is about adults and is written from an adult's point of view. The talking reindeer are amusing, but I think that this story could upset young children even though the poem ends with Santa declaring that the snowmobile will not replace the reindeer in years to come.

The drawings by John Myćka are definitely a distraction, and the book would be better off without them. The cover and the drawings are awkward and unappealing. Santa and Elmo especially look like exaggerated cartoon characters. In contrast, there is one drawing of Santa in bed which is rather frightening. After all these points have been raised, an uneasy feeling remains. I wonder where the editors at the Highway Book Shop press were when Marlene Moore needed them?

It is to the publishers' advantage to produce the highest quality possible, if they want to share in the slim profits of book publishing. The average printing of a children's book is 3,000 copies from which a writer receives 10%. Over a three year period, on an average price of \$10.95, an author can expect to make \$3,295, if the book is a sellout. (These figures are from the 1981 Discover catalogue produced by The Children's Book Centre.) The publisher is not likely to make much more, so his books must be competitive, both with the larger publishers and on the world market.

Government grants have made survival possible for these small publishers; otherwise they would have to have a huge private working capital. However, just as small publishers are becoming established as

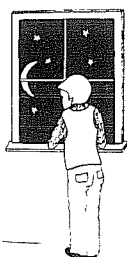
a force in children's literature, government assistance seems to be jeopardized by government "belt tightening" and grant cutbacks. A delicate balance exists in this business and the vagaries of politics could have a devastating effect on the survival of a productive, but poor publishing industry.

Pride in Canadian talent and the ability to produce world-class literature are driving forces behind the small publishers. Obviously, there is a need to publish more Canadian authors. The need for quality control, however, is also obvious.

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