

THE COLOURS OF FEELING

Red is best, Kathy Stinson. Illus. by Robin Baird Lewis. Annick Press Ltd., 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-929236-26-X. ***Big or little?*** Kathy Stinson. Illus. by Robin Baird Lewis. Annick Press Ltd., 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-32-4. ***Tobo hates purple***, Gina Calleja. Illus. Author Annick Press Ltd., 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-92236-43-X.

Kathy Stinson of Islington, Ontario, won the 1982 I.O.D.E. children's book award for *Red is best* (see *Toronto Star*, March 29, 1983) and has since published *Big or little?* As a mother of two and former elementary school teacher, currently involved in a pre-school programme, she reveals a genuine grasp of the child's world as seen from the inside. Such striking details as "my red barrettes make my hair laugh" and "red paint puts singing in my head" (especially the first example) convince us that Kathy Stinson knows children well and has listened to them with both amusement and love.

Red is best depicts Kelly's determination to wear red despite all maternal objections. "But I can jump higher in my red stockings," she says. First person narration gives us Kelly's point of view simply and directly. And the illustrations are excellent here (See Figure 1). Robin Baird Lewis, who lives in Guelph and works in the University's Alumni office, has the same loving feel for children's movements that Kathy Stinson has for children's language, though I find the faces in both *Red is best* and *Big or little?* somewhat sentimentalised. Kathy Stinson's use of repeated phrases would make the books effective as early school readers, though I would see the stories themselves appealing to kindergarten and nursery school children. My daughter who has just finished Grade One, for example, enjoys them but, I think, finds them a bit young. Kelly's determination that all shall be red comes through with liveliness and force. The effective combination of language and illustration expresses the real feelings of Kelly's vitality.

Big or little? is equally well done. We see the boy, Matthew, learning to cope with the world in which he feels both big and little — big when he looks down at his feet, ties his shoes, zips his jeans or buttons his shirt, little when he can't reach an elevator button, can't find a sock or wets the bed. The shifting emotions of childhood come through convincingly as Matthew tries to orient himself in the world. Again text and illustrations work together effectively, though I'm troubled by the faceless father at the end of the book. Is that because so many fathers are faceless these days?

In both books first person perspective in story and illustrations combine together well. The books are beautifully produced by Annick Press, though I wish that they were cheaper. Kathy Stinson and Robin Baird Lewis have a real compatibility as author and illustrator. Their work is mutually enhancing. I hope that they will produce many more books together.

Gina Calleja has been illustrating children's books since 1966. Born in England, she studied art at Reading University and at the Slade School of Fine Art in London University. Her *Tobo hates purple* presents Tobo's reluctance to accept being purple even though (or perhaps because) his mother is blue and his father red. One thinks of Kermit the Frog's, "It's not easy being green." The implication would seem to be racial. Coping with difference of colour is, thus, handled allegorically or in fantasy. However, one is led to speculate further on the use of colour symbolism in literature. Red presents few problems as the colour of love and desire. In *Red is best*, red vividly expresses Kelly's wishes. Purple is harder to elucidate. Although Tobo's father is red (and presumably Tobo identifies with him) he looks like a clown and does not have a strong presence in the story. Tobo's mother is blue (the colour of fidelity as in "true blue") and Tobo's mother is a much stronger presence in the story. Throughout Tobo is in conflict and depression. He has "the blues" or in his case "the purples." Purple is the colour of bruising, though the source of Tobo's inner bruising is obscure since it is not fully explained in the story. Of course, we cannot expect children (or even most adults) to grasp the meanings of recondite symbolism in any intellectual way but they are often felt. Colours associated with feelings are frequently potent symbols in art and literature. This book, is, also, beautifully produced by the same company as the Stinson-Lewis books but on a shinier paper. The illustrations are more sophisticated than those in the other two books (See Figure 2), and are often of more interest than the story which is rather slender. After trying every colour, Tobo, with the kindness and help of his friend Mina, decides to accept himself as purple. Mina's love and sympathy conquer Tobo's despair. Repetition of key phrases again makes the book a useful prospect as a school reader for children a little older than those for whom the other two books are intended. There is even a page that a child could colour so long as crayon was used instead of paint.

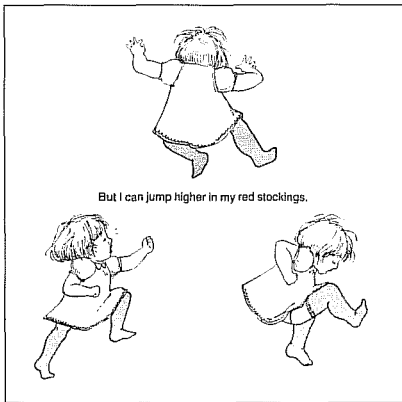


Figure 1

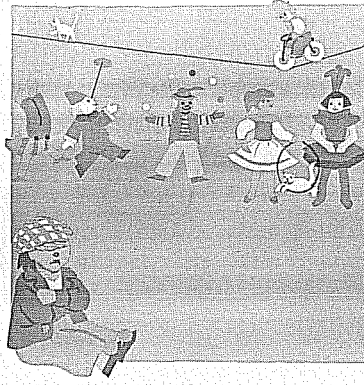


Figure 2

All three books concern children grappling with primary emotions: Kelly expresses her individuality through her insistence on wearing red, Matthew in *Big or little?* wrestles with the contrasts between two feelings, while Tobo struggles to accept being “purple.” We all know how sensitive children are to feelings but what about thoughts? Children think as well as feel and, of course, all three children, here, think about red, big or little, and purple as well as feel about them. Couldn’t the authors, therefore, develop simple themes or fables that would help children to interpret their environment as well as feel it? Surely artists, whether writing and illustrating for children, adults, or both, have a responsibility to help us interpret and understand our world as well as to express our feelings. This is simply to say that while all three books are good, they could all be better, more complete in their treatments of human experience. **John Ferns** teaches Victorian and Canadian literature at McMaster University where he is Associate Professor of English and Associate Dean of Humanities (Studies). He has published a book on A.J.M. Smith.

CONVENTIONS AND DISTORTIONS IN HISTORICAL FICTION

The king’s daughter, Suzanne Martel. Translated by David Toby Homel and Margaret Rose. Illus. by Debi Perna. Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1980. 211 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-006-5.

In the chapter on historical fiction in her important study of Canadian children’s literature, Sheila Egoff pinpoints the weaknesses of our historical fiction for young people:

These books do recount an aspect of the past but they seldom recreate it. In paraphrasing Canada’s history, our writers fill their pages with irrelevancies and snippets of lore. They decide to parcel out so much history and so much narrative, and in doing so they usually weigh the parcel in favour of history. And how they love to teach it! Gratuitous dates and place-names abound, along with “how-to-do-it” information.¹

Suzanne Martel’s *The king’s daughter*, translated from the French *Jeanne, fille du roy*², avoids this particular pitfall. Concentrating on a footnote of history — the attempt by Louis XIV to populate New France in the 1670s by sending numbers of his wards, “the King’s daughters,” out as wives for the *habitants* — Martel has hit upon a theme with novelistic potential: How would a young French girl adapt to this harsh, new world, and to a husband more suited to this rustic environment than to the civilized one she had left behind?

In developing this theme, Martel gives her readers a feel for the society of New France, from its Indians to its “urban” nobility, for the way of life of the voyageur and the trapper, and for the joys and hardships of cabin life in the forest, with a minimum of historical facts or woodlore. Unfortunately, as