

Le héros que nous présente la bande dessinée reste très fidèle à ce que nous savons du personnage historique. Les aventures racontées dans ces quatre livres sont en effet presque toutes basées sur les témoignages recueillis pendant les années 60 par M. Larouche. Ceci est valable surtout pour les premiers albums; mais je crois constater dans le quatrième album que c'est le farceur plutôt que l'athlète qui est mis en évidence. Les mauvais tours (inoffensifs, bien sûr) tournent mal, le farceur, démasqué ou pris à son propre piège, y ressemble moins à un héros folklorique qu'à cet autre farceur bien sympathique mais nullement héroïque, Gaston La Gaffe. Mais tout se raconte avec humour et bonhomie.

Chaque album contient en moyenne huit épisodes de quatre pages chacun. Sans être d'une qualité exceptionnelle, les dessins sont agréables à regarder et faciles à suivre. Le langage est simple, le dialogue, qui ne manque pourtant pas de pittoresque, est rédigé en bon "français international," n'évoquant ni région ni époque. Même chez Georges le gros bûcheron, les régionalismes sont inexistantes. Alexis lui-même semble avoir lu Descartes ("Je cours, donc je suis"). Cette décision se défend, étant donné le public visé. L'on se demande si au Canada anglais il n'y aurait pas des élèves dans des programmes d'immersion française qui trouveraient utilité et agrément à la lecture des exploits du Cheval du Nord.

Tout peuple a besoin de ses héros légendaires. Alexis a toutes les qualités requises pour figurer sur la liste des héros québécois, en compagnie d'autres personnages extraordinaires, ramancheurs, hommes forts et autres athlètes. Pour les jeunes d'aujourd'hui ses exploits paraîtront peut-être ceux d'un passé bien lointain; ils appartiennent en effet au "bon vieux temps," à une société fermée, rurale et conservatrice qui a disparu à jamais. On peut craindre que "les jeunes" de nos jours, habitués aux Superman et autres héros plus grands que nature ne trouvent les aventures vécues d'Alexis quelque peu simplètes. Ce serait dommage. Espérons que de nombreux jeunes Canadiens, au Québec et ailleurs, y découvriront avec plaisir l'histoire de ce Québécois unique. *Neal Johnson est professeur à l'Université de Guelph où il enseigne un cours sur la littérature pour enfants dans la section d'Etudes françaises.*

## MUNSCHKINLAND REVISITED

Robert Munsch, ably assisted by illustrator Michael Martchenko, has in recent months added five new titles for children to his rapidly lengthening list. Production at this rapid-fire pace tends to result in uneven quality. One of the five titles is quite notably charming, three are par for the high-powered Munsch-Martchenko course, and one is . . . well, perhaps not the best thing they've ever done.

Worst first. *The boy in the drawer* is inventive and mildly humorous, but a less than successful fantasy when all is said. Child heroine Shelley finds her

bedroom inexplicably littered with socks. Upon investigation, she discovers a boy (smaller than a bread box), reading a book in her sock drawer. He glances up in an unfriendly way and says "Please go away. You are bothering me." She does — he vanishes, she tidies the mess. End of episode.

Next she discovers him in her bed, watering a tomato plant, with soil, puddles and mess everywhere. Same rude brush-off; again the boy vanishes. Mummy knows nothing about it. Shelley tidies the mess. (How?) End of episode. Then the boy paints her window black. Shelley objects, he repeats his only remark. This time, however, Shelley retaliates by painting one of his ears black. The boy grows two inches (he is not a metric boy, we ascertain). Mother is cross at the mess, and Shelley spends hours cleaning up AGAIN.

At last, supertime. In the kitchen, Shelley finds her father busy cooking, mother reading (they are a contemporary family); apparently they are unaware that water is rising above their ankles and over the unprotesting cat's head, until Shelley mentions the matter.

Shelley opens the bread box, inside which the boy is taking a bath. She turns the cold water on, hard. The boy screams, jumps out, grows two more inches. There he sits, in the middle of the kitchen table. What a situation. What to do? Then Shelley is inspired. She pats the boy; he shrinks. Father hugs him; he gets smaller. Mother gives him a kiss, and he disappears entirely. Everything is, as Shelley says, "definitely okay."

But what has happened here? Is the mysterious boy to be interpreted as being a personification of trouble, a gremlin who will grow if he meets retaliation, or shrink and disappear if treated cheerfully? If so, the story should have begun about two pages earlier, based upon a fit of temper or some other discernible cause, rather than with an irrational, unmotivated mess for the blameless child to restore to order. Youngsters may accept the story as purely fantastic fun, and merely be amused by the horrid little boy's bad behaviour; but the "read to me" crowd of six years and under, the obvious audience for this picture tale, generally prefer the course of fictional events to be reasonable rather than irrational and arbitrary, while older children, able to read for themselves, will not often choose stories about "small fry" younger than themselves, like Shelley. There are some nice touches in *The boy in the drawer*, such as the picture of Shelley curled up with a copy of *The paper bag princess*; but they are touches that will tickle the adult reader-aloud, rather than the read-to child.

Far more appealing, with all the charm of the earlier "Munschkins," is *Murmel murmel murmel*. Robin finds a large hole in her sandbox, with something deep inside that says "Murmel Murmel Murmel." She reaches in and yanks the intruder out — it's a baby. Robin is nonplussed — a rare state of mind for a Munsch child, but reasonable in that she is only five years old. She realizes that she can't take proper care of a baby, so she goes in search of somebody who can and will. A woman pushing a carriage doesn't want *another* baby; a lady with seventeen cats is also fully occupied; a glamorous

young woman has plenty of jobs and no time. A man of affairs sees no money to be made on babies. Robin is just about worn out. Then a burly truck driver comes by. "Excuse me, do you need a baby?" Robin asks. The driver is not exactly eager, until the baby says "Murmel, Murmel, Murmel." THAT the driver can't resist. They make a simple trade — he takes the baby, and leaves his huge truck for Robin. It's pure fun, and the baby's charming bubbly "Murmel Murmel Murmel" really does sound like that special moment just before an infant begins to talk and then to talk and talk and talk endlessly . . . Maybe Robin caught her truck driver in the very nick of time. Youngsters will enjoy the take-off of those poor creatures who resist the blandishments of the mystery baby, for they really are funny caricatures. *Murmel murmel murmel* is vintage Munsch.

The three remaining titles are rather slight, but will undoubtedly find friends among the younger set. In *Angela's airplane*, the intrepid little heroine whose father contrives to get himself lost in the airport, somehow finds herself aboard a plane and begins idly pushing buttons. Of course, the plane takes off, and in landing it, under instruction by radio, Angela manages to smash it into little pieces, though she herself "didn't even have a scratch." She promises her father she will never ever fly another plane, but she doesn't keep the promise; she grows up to become an airplane pilot. Silly stuff, but cheerful and satisfying to a lot of would-be pilots, half-pint size or less, of both sexes.

*Mortimer* is the noisiest little kid who ever upset an entire neighbourhood. He has been put to bed, but sings his refrain of "Bang-bang, rattle-ding-bang, goin' to make my noise all day. Bang-bang, rattle-ding-bang, goin' to make my noise all day!" over and over until his parents, his seventeen brothers and sisters, and even the police are unnerved and embroiled in great big fights. Mortimer, bored with waiting for yet another hapless victim to come upstairs and tell him to "Be quiet!" falls peacefully asleep, while turmoil rages below. Again, a silly little story with a catchy refrain, one that most people would prefer NOT to hear echoing from the nursery of an evening . . . Mortimer is of indiscernible age; he could be a big baby, or a small boy — but he's such a pest, even somewhat older kids will probably find him amusing.

Unusually for Munsch, *The fire station* has two leading roles, those of Michael and Sheila, both apparently five years old or thereabouts. Sheila is a born instigator. She drags half-willing Michael into the fire station, lures him up onto the truck, and during an alarm, the two children, undiscovered, are taken to a fire, become completely discoloured with chemical smoke, and return home in such a state that their various parents don't recognize them — much in the time-honoured *Harry the dirty dog* tradition. Michael's mother washes him for three days to get him clean: Sheila's father scrubs her for *five* days to remove all the traces. At story's end, Sheila and Michael are looking speculatively at a police station . . . and Sheila is dragging at an unwilling Michael AGAIN.

Munsch's little people can be relied upon to be resourceful, determined to

a fault, and self-sufficient at least up until the point where baths become imperative. The world they live in is non-sexist to an idealistic degree; Munsch's celebrated *Paper bag princess* is by way of becoming a cult-heroine for the skipping-rope set; and his stouthearted young Jonathan, who could take on a whole subway system and WIN, is not above lending a hand with the housework. Such are the messages Munsch's work delivers, but never in a "messagey" way. Fairness and equality of opportunity are simply the atmosphere, the worldview, within which his cheerful children operate. Munsch has "a talent to amuse," and that is what he does first and best. His are stories for the telling: they come easily to the tongue, and fall pleasantly upon the ear. He understands the childish love of the repeated phrase or nonsense word ("Murmel, Murmel, Murmel"); the magic sequence of events that eager little listeners can gleefully foresee, as when all the harried adults, one by one, try to quell noisy Mortimer and are defeated; the wild exaggeration of seventeen desperate diaper salesmen in hot pursuit of the lady with the baby carriage.

The proof of one's success when telling stories to young children comes when the audience clamours to have a favourite tale told again and again. Robert Munsch's light, bright, popular stories for and about lively, self-confident Canadian kids survive the "Read it again" test as easily as his kids survive dragons, plane wrecks and apoplectic parents. Or whatever new obstacle he invents with which to challenge them next time. . .

*Angela's airplane*, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1983. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-75-8. *The boy in the drawer*, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1982. Unpaginated. \$12.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-34-0, 0-920236-36-7. *The fire station*, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1983. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-77-4. *Mortimer*, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1983. Unpaginated. \$.99 paper. ISBN 0-920236-68-5. *Murmel murmel murmel*, Robert Munsch. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1982. Unpaginated. \$12.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920236-29-4, 0-920236-31-6.

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## MORE SANTA OFFERINGS

*Santa's odyssey*, Gwen McNab. Illus. Paul Freitag. Initiative Publishing House, 1980. 62 pp., \$8.90 cloth. ISBN 0-88951-017-2. *Santa's own toys*, Evelyn Passegand. Illus. Marie-José Sacré. Annick Press, 1980. 24pp., cloth. ISBN 0-920236-12-X.