

Review Articles and Reviews

ANNE IN THE NURSERY

A child's Anne, retold by Deidre Kessler. Illus. by Floyd Trainor. Ragweed Press, 1983. 46 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920304-11-7. *The Anne of Green Gables picture book*, Molly Hughes. Illus. by Marc Gallant. N.C. Press, 1982, first published in 1978. Unpaginated. \$2.50. ISBN 0-919601-55-3.

L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is a perennial favourite for teenage girls from ten or eleven to fifteen or sixteen and for adults who first met Anne in their teenage years. A certain cynicism must touch those who would take a book for adolescent girls and "retell" it for elementary school children. When Lewis Carroll did this with *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, he acknowledged that his fantasy with its seven-year-old protagonist was too difficult for an audience of seven year old children.

The retelling of *Anne of Green Gables* for younger children strikes me as a curious undertaking. What gives Montgomery's book its appeal is its energy, an energy derived mainly from Anne's personality, from her incessant chatter and indomitable optimism, and from the narrator's amused, ironic, yet affectionate attitude towards Anne. In short, the book's language is important: Anne's naming, her use and misuse of long words and quotations, and the narrator's awareness of the child's efforts to master her mother tongue. This, inevitably, is lost in a retelling for younger children. Lost too is the important change that takes place in Anne as she grows into the "serious-eyed girl of fifteen" with "thoughtful brows," that thoroughly socialized young lady who returns from Queens' at the end of *Anne of Green Gables*. The serious themes — growth, conformity, imagination, duty, affection — cannot perforce be part of a "Nursery Anne."

What then is left to offer the younger child? Clearly, what Kessler and Trainor think will interest him or her is the skeleton of *Anne*, the situations that pit a lively but lonely orphan girl against adults or that show her interacting with her friends. The fifteen two page chapters in *A child's Anne* include nearly all the novel's main incidents; the only episodes left out are those dealing with

church and Sunday School, the lost brooch, Miss Josephine Barry, the Haunted Woods, the tea with Mr. and Mrs. Allan, the fall from Mr. Barry's kitchen roof, and the Story Club. The rest of the novel, stripped to the bones, remains; but without drama, tension, or feeling. The reason *A child's Anne* fails is that it presumes the story is what matters, not the telling. For example, in *A child's Anne*, the trip to Orchard's Slope, the introduction to Diana, the return home, and mention of the Sunday School picnic take thirty-four lines. The same details take nearly seven times longer for L.M. Montgomery to tell in *Anne*. Compare Anne's introduction to Mrs. Barry in the two works. First read Kessler's retelling; Mrs. Barry greets Marilla and Anne at her front door:

"How do you do?" she said. "Come in. And is this the little girl you adopted, Marilla?"
"My name is Anne Shirley," gasped Anne nervously. "Spelled with an e."
"How do you do. This is my little girl, Diana. Why don't you two go out into the garden?"
Mrs. Barry was a rather stern woman.

Here is the original:

"How do you do Marilla?" she said cordially. "Come in. And this is the little girl you have adopted, I suppose?"
"Yes, this is Anne Shirley," said Marilla.
"Spelled with an e," gasped Anne, who, tremulous and excited as she was, was determined there should be no misunderstanding on that important point.
Mrs. Barry, not hearing or not comprehending, merely shook hands and said kindly: "How are you?"
"I am well in body although considerably ruffled up in spirit, thank you, ma'am," said Anne gravely. Then aside to Marilla in an audible whisper, "There wasn't anything startling in that, was there, Marilla?"

The retelling misses the essential elements of the original: Anne's grand, if grave, reply to Mrs. Barry and her aside to Marilla. But more disturbing is the form of the retelling. Clearly, Kessler has not, in fact, "retold" the story; instead she has "edited" the original. These are L.M. Montgomery's words, not Kessler's. Not only is this method of retelling unfair to Montgomery, it also results in unmotivated statements. For example, in chapter 3 after returning with Anne from Mrs. Spencer's, Marilla remarks to herself: "She *is* kind of interesting, as Matthew says. I can feel already that I'm wondering what on earth she'll say next." Since Anne has said next to nothing so far in this version, one must wonder what Marilla is talking about.

Despite such failings, the book might have impressed with its illustrations. Sadly, it does not. Floyd Trainor's illustrations are static and harsh. Trainor tries to convey the pastoralism of Montgomery's novel through his use of flowers and animals, but he employs his motifs to distraction. In the illustration to

chapter 6, the scene in which Gilbert takes Anne's pigtail and whispers "Carrots," a cow with a bird on its head and flowers in its mouth gazes in a window. The touch might be surreal, but I doubt it. The figures are ugly (poor Gilbert looks terribly fey), the compositions are strained, and the perspective is awkward (the boy in the desk behind Gilbert should, were he given life, slide to the floor since he is hardly in his seat). Matthew and Marilla look to be in their late thirties. Towards the end Anne appears dressed the same as she is at the beginning, a detail that suggests that she has not changed really. Yet she has. The whole is confusing. In the illustration to chapter 5, which also serves as cover illustration to *A child's Anne*, Trainor provides detail from the original version that Kessler has been unable to incorporate in her retelling. The picture illustrates the Sunday School picnic. The middle distance shows a dapper fellow on a bench with a glass and a book in his hands; he might be looking at the elegant young lady who sits on the grass. One can only imagine that these two are Mr. Philips and Prissy Andrews, two characters who have no roles to play in *A child's Anne*. They are prominent in this illustration and yet only a reader familiar with the original novel could identify them — or the scene for that matter.

Although the title is misleading, *The Anne of Green Gables picture book* is a better introduction to the world of Green Gables than *A child's Anne*. The title misleads because this is more than a picture book; it is a colouring book. Four pages at the beginning retell the story (and this *is* a retelling), and then the pictures provide a cursory version of the novel's plot from Anne's arrival at the Bright River Railway Station to her acceptance into the world of Green Gables. We see her at work and at play, alone and with Diana, admiring herself and contemplating the world; we see her world, Green Gables and its country setting, the kitchen with its iron stove and oil lamps, Anne's bedroom with its washbowl and chamber pot, a field of daisies, fiddleheads, and cherry blossoms. The illustrations, as in most colouring books, are bold; but they are not simple. The detail — flowers, curtains, etc. — in many pictures will tax a young child's imagination. The paper is stiff and of good quality so that the child who avoids crayons in favour of the magic marker will not have to contend with paper that blots. The book has real virtues as a colouring book, and it also introduces the child to the easy long summer world of Montgomery's book.

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