

VIEWS OF THE ELDERLY

Absolutely Absalom, Michael O. Nowlan. Illus. by C. Elizabeth Baker. Lyndon House Publishing, 1981. 39 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920948-3-0. *Baker's heaven*, Wence Horai. Illus. Sarie Jenkins. Three Trees Press, 1982. 20 pp. \$10.95 cloth, \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-88823-036-2; 0-88823-043-5. *Binky and the bamboo brush*, Adelle LaRouche. Illus. by author. Gage, 1981. 44 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7715-6314-0. *Mr. Wurtzel and the Halloween bunny*, Anita Krumins. Illus. Brian Fray. Three Trees Press, 1982. 22pp. \$11.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88823-048-6; 0-88823-047-8.

Elderly people have always moved through the pages of children's books. Most often they are stereotypical: old gentlemen, either kindly or crusty, grandmotherly women or sharp spinsters. Of course, truly memorable characters do emerge as in the Cleavers' *Queen of hearts*, or Robert Burch's *Two that were tough*. With today's rapidly aging society, it is more important than ever that the portrayal of the elderly for children have depth and truth.

Four recent books which have senior citizen characters provide a sampling of the views young Canadians are given of this age group. What would happen if a child were given these books and expected to form an opinion of old people from them?

Of the four, *Mr. Wurtzel and the Halloween bunny* is the one most likely to be picked up by children. The brightly coloured cover shows a carefree child in a rabbit costume walking away from a dilapidated house. The rumped old man on the porch is Mr. Wurtzel. "Nobody had ever been nice to Mr. Wurtzel. And nobody ever would. Because Mr. Wurtzel was horrible! He was mean. He was awful." Mr. Wurtzel, the reader is told, didn't like grownups, or kids (especially cute ones) or anything that was cute.

There are, apparently, no redeeming features about Mr. Wurtzel. The illustrations present him as shabby, unkempt, with teeth missing and wearing glasses. He lives in what looks like a haunted house, and when the door is opened, the reader can see mice skulking around his stairway.

The reaction of neighbourhood adults and children to the old man seems at least partially justified. He chases harmless creatures off his lawn, and on one occasion catches a stray pet rabbit and refuses to return it, saying it will go into the stew pot.

Enter the child Emily, new to the neighbourhood and unaware of Mr. Wurtzel's reputation. On Halloween she knocks at his door, dressed as a bunny and comes face to face with a growling, shouting Mr. Wurtzel. When she says how nice it is of him to be so scary and frighten ghosts away "Mr. Wurtzel's face went pale. Nice? No one had ever said he was nice before. The tiniest trace

of a smile appeared on Mr. Wurtzel's face. Before he knew what he was doing, he put his hand in his pocket, found a quarter, and gave it to Emily."

If they analyzed the story, children might recognize the value of not allowing people to be labelled and of not being influenced by appearances alone. The power of love could also be recognized. But most children will not analyze. They will be amazed at Wurtzel's transformation, so easily achieved, and may be disappointed at the abrupt ending of the story. As Emily hops happily on her way, the reader knows little more about the old man than at the story's beginning. Will he return to his old ways? There is no sign about what the future holds for him.

Absolutely Absalom, the title character of Michael Nowlan's book, gets his odd nickname from the fact that no one has ever heard him say anything except the one word "absolutely" since he came to town.

Like Mr. Wurtzel he is less than dapper in appearance: he has an unsmiling face, a heavy black beard, a fedora hat, large walking stick, and rumpled dark clothing.

Unlike Mr. Wurtzel, he arouses no animosity in his neighbours, only curiosity. Nancy and Bill Rupert, nine and ten years old, react to him with a mixture of compassion and fear. Their decision to unravel the mystery of his life prompts them to confront him with the demand for information. Much to their surprise, they are answered politely and invited to visit him at his home. What they find at his house proves to them that appearances can be deceiving.

Though his unpainted house and shadowy yard seem imposing, even threatening, they are, in fact, warm and inviting, as is Absalom. His story reveals that he is a refugee from a country governed by a dictator, and that he covered his escape by pretending to drown. For years he has felt compelled to keep to himself lest word get back to his homeland where his mother's life would then be in danger.

Based on the sampling thus far, our child reader would have to assume that old people are shabby, eccentric and live in houses that appear mysterious. What a surprise, then, to read *Binky and the bamboo brush* and meet Binky's elderly grandfather. Grandfather is very much a part of the Kee family in their Chinatown apartment. He is, we are told, Binky's favorite family member.

Binky's story offers an intriguing look at the daily life of a young Chinese/Canadian boy but his relationship with his grandfather is not fully described. The reader is told that grandfather used to paint beautiful pictures but now he sits silently by the window, looking outside. There is a tempting glimpse into his youth when he gives Binky his treasured bamboo brush and says, "I know you are a good boy at heart. I was like you when I was a boy. Did you know that?" Since Binky was, at the time, confined to the apartment for cutting his Chinese school classes and wandering the streets of Chinatown, this admission instantly piques the curiosity. But alas, the reader learns no

more about grandfather except that he feels very deeply for his grandson.

Not long after he is given the brush, Binky arrives home to find that his grandfather was not in his usual place "Your grandfather was an old man, Binky, his mother said sadly. None of us can hope to live forever . . . Binky was sad for many days after that."

Because the reader himself has no real knowledge of, or feeling for grandfather, he remains an observer of Binky's quiet grief. Grandfather's spirit, in fact, seems more active in Binky's life than his actual presence was. As he thinks about his grandfather, Binky begins to see around him the beauty his grandfather used to capture with a few brush strokes on paper. He begins to experiment with the bamboo brush and discovers a talent for painting and new found skill at Chinese school.

Though the story is nicely done, the character of grandfather is barely developed, and grandmother appears in only two lines of the story. Our young reader has only a shadowy impression to add to his slowly growing picture of old age.

The fourth book, *Baker's heaven*, differs from the others because it has no child character. The book is peopled only by the baker and the memories he shapes in dough and bakes into pictures. Horai's low key story will not be for every child. There is no real action, nor a conflict to be resolved. What there is, for the reader who seeks it out, is a lonely man's memories of a happy life. Through his pictures the reader learns that Baker Johnny had a happy youth, a loving wife and children, and that he worked hard at his trade. He had pets, and friends, and was a kindly man. When a woman sees Johnny's pictures and wants to exhibit them as art, he is unwilling. "At first, Johnny didn't want any strange people poking their noses into his private heaven. But, thinking about it more, he said, 'Oh, this is only my heaven. All the good people can share in it.' And many people did come to see his pictures. They also came to love him for what they saw in them. From that time on, Johnny never felt alone again."

Perhaps it is in this book, then, that our young reader gains the most insight into old age. He sees the sorrow and loneliness of a man left alone, has a glimpse of all that went on in the man's life, and then is shown that, though old, the man still has something to share with society.

It is hard to leave our young reader with only these four images of old age. What he needs is more depth in the characters of old people. He needs to see the characters come alive, he must know them, must share their joys and sorrows. It is only when he can feel for the characters that he will have bridged the generations and have some inkling of what it is to grow old.

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