

Whereas *The little magic fiddler* is rather short on dramatic incident *A treasure for Tony* has, if anything, too much. There are plot elements in *A treasure* from three different genres: the treasure hunt; the career story of Tony's plans to be a ballet dancer; and to a lesser extent, the genre of Y.A. realism, which seems to be influencing the treatment in the book of Tony's friends (children from the new housing development like Joanna, who is black sophisticated, and abandoned by her mother, or like Gavin, who Tony suspect may be a battered child). These disparate elements aren't brought together entirely successfully, but the attempt is a book worth the reader's attention

Catherine Ross is on the faculty of the School of Library and Information Science, The University of Western Ontario.

DISTANT TIMES AND PLACES

A northern alphabet, Ted Harrison. Tundra Books, 1982. 32 pp. \$10.95 cloth ISBN 0-88776-133-X. ***Children of Lapland***, Bodil Hagbrink. Tundra Books 1979. 28 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-114-3. ***West Coast Chinese boy***, Sing Lim. Tundra Books, 1979. 64 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-121-6.

Ted Harrison's paintings of the Yukon warmly suggest the pleasures of a cold climate. Clear, flat, jewel-bright colours fill in simplified outlines and stylized backgrounds, and an abundance of hot pinks, reds and oranges is quite startlingly appropriate. The clean lines, simplicity and brilliance are a joyous celebration of the atmosphere, light and landscape of the North. It is a pity then that the pictures, as they appear in this third book for children, *A northern alphabet* are so small. An awkward inch of white frame, containing words beginning with the appropriate letter of the alphabet, reduces and dominates each one (how much better they are without it may be seen by looking at the cover) and incidentally draws attention to the signal weakness of the book: its words

I suspect that Ted Harrison, like many another adult, hasn't realized that precisely because the alphabet is so simple and structured, it is extremely demanding. Indeed, there are such numbers of artistically beautiful alphabet books which fail in the matter of words that it is easy to believe the alphabet an intrinsically dull form (though fit for children, of course). Yet if you consider that old favourite "A was an apple pie. B bit it. C cut it" etc., it is quite clear that the words of an alphabet book require a particular imaginative effort; and also that Harrison has assembled his words with doggedness rather than inspiration. Like small children regimented into rows, they have all sort of spirit and personality just waiting to be released to play the game that will set them free. And there are, of course, as many games to be played with word

as with children, tongue-twisters, punning, nonsense, all of which will work as well as the neat imposition of a simple plot (wherein A becomes not merely an apple but an apple *pie*, demanding to be eaten).

But Harrison has no games to play; nothing more, you might say, than a roll call. It is all much too earnest and dull. "The man in the red parka is passing the paddlewheeler" makes even the cat who sat on the mat look interesting. Occasionally a sentence seems about to topple over into nonsensical humour, as in "The owl can see the oilrig from the outhouse," but it never quite does. In any case the nature of the pictures is against it since humour is not part of their charm. The book fails as an alphabet, ripped up by the way in which those 26 magic symbols and the music of the words associated with them have been taken too much for granted. Harrison's loving evocation of life in the North, however, even in diminished size, is to be enjoyed through the paintings.

Bodil Hagbrink in *Children of Lapland*, like Harrison, is concerned with conveying the fascinating otherness of life in the north. The problem, by no means unfamiliar in children's books over the centuries, is that the semi-fictional mode in which she has chosen to present her non-fiction, tying her information about the lives of the Laplanders to the activities of one family, is not shaped into any dramatic form. It is not merely the lack of a story; even the facts are robbed of their proper significance. A brief part of the text, for instance, concerns the participation of the son of the family, Johan-Aslak, in a reindeer race. Since this is given no greater emphasis than the making of boots or school attendance, it is only by an accidental glance at the back cover that the reader may later realize with a start that this must have been the famous annual reindeer race.

Hagbrink's illustrations, though jolly and colourful, are laboriously predictable in a way that re-affirms rather than rises above the problems of the text. There is no sense of an individual interpretation of place such as is given by Harrison's daring use of colour; snow, for instance, is never anything but a conventional blue and white. Her rounded figures with their carefully recorded costumes and the gingerbread house shapes are as re-assuringly pretty as a Christmas card, but nothing more. Moreover, the distant perspective she favours necessitates the reduction of her characters to tiny figures in a crowd, indistinguishable only by action, thus reinforcing the lack of characterization within the text. Yet the careful naming and placing of her little family at the beginning of the story are a clear signal to the reader to expect them to be important as individuals.

Such uncertainty of focus is reflected in the text, where the painfully condescending tone (of the "Now you see so-and-so doing such-and-such" variety), and the amount and size of the print, indicate that it is meant only for an adult reading to a child. One notably redundant sentence points out that Mikkel-Anders is on the swing, presumably because the adult is less likely to notice this than the child. Keeping an eye on two audiences at once puts an intolerable

strain on the unity of the book, and Hagbrink's lack of success confirms how right most modern authors are to avoid this approach entirely. In any case the difference such a technique assumes between the responses of adult and child have been proved both incorrect and unnecessary.

Sing Lim's *West Coast Chinese boy* is a quite different kind of picture book hardly for children at all, but full of interest; it is one of those recollections of childhood in word and picture which are (thinking of Kurelek or Italiano's *The sleighs of my childhood*) something of a Canadian speciality. Lim was born in Canada in 1915, to parents who had emigrated from China, and thus he bridges two cultures in a way that makes him at once unique and typically Canadian. What anguish the attempt to belong to both worlds caused the sensitive little boy is conveyed with an affectionate humour which makes light of but does not entirely disguise it.

Distrust and dislike of the Chinese ("the yellow peril") were then so widespread in Vancouver that extraordinary measures were necessary to protect them from rioters. The massive iron gates which defended the single entrance to the huge building in which they were obliged to live was symbolic of their isolation. Little more is needed to explain the tenacity with which the Chinese clung to their traditions and, in a tit-for-tat elitism that doubly isolated Sing Lim amongst others, nicknamed the Chinese who had been born in Canada 'siwash' and 'half-breed'. The tension also bred its moments of high comedy however. The funeral of a rich Chinese man became a bid for prestige that cannot altogether have been served by the spectacle of Mac's Moving Van, hired for the occasion from a white Canadian, which carried the members of the orchestra of the Chinese opera house and brought up the rear of the long procession, punctuating the sound of their cymbals, horns, drums and gong by loud backfire.

The hard work expected of Lim — two hours at the Chinese school every day in addition to regular school; thirteen hours a day in the fields for a nine year-old — belong more to the nineteenth century than the twentieth. Indeed his life as a child seems almost as remote as some of the Chinese traditions to which he introduces us: a cure for rheumatism which involved soaking live rattlesnakes in alcohol; the customary party to shave the new baby's head; his own father's boldness in being one of the first to cut off his pigtail, thus denying himself the right ever to return to the country of his birth. Lim himself is well aware of the strangeness of it all; one of the charms of the book is the shadow-image of the author behind his anecdotes, laughing and shaking his head in wonderment at his own testimony to that far-off time. In fact, that is the key to the book's success. The stamp of authenticity is there, a sense of the delights and pains of a real childhood.

This is not greatly due to the text, however, which is often flat and halting. The division by headings into short pieces — "The Drug Store," "Kind and

Cruel Guardians' — is a naive device, reminiscent of Emily Carr's *The book of small*, although Lim has nothing of Carr's inventive and lively metaphor. Nevertheless, despite the unpolished sentences, the truth of human experience shines through to warm the reader. It is what makes the difference between Lim's book and Hagbrink's. Both are accounts of things distant, one in time, one in place; both are full of the potential of strange matters to engage our attention, but one, drawing on his own childhood, manages to bring his scenes the other, lacking that invaluable asset, has nothing to substitute for it.

Laughter and a sense of humour are, Lim asserts, what have enabled the Chinese to survive, and this is borne out by the hundred black and white marginal drawings which fill his pages. Their spontaneous, comic liveliness is similar to that of Edward Lear and just as self-deprecating. Full of vitality, they dance off the pages with subtlety, irony or the author's own gloss on the inadequacy of the words. These quick sketches, in a variety of styles, are the most natural and exuberant accompaniment to Lim's stories. Beside them the colour plates seem stiffish, formal; they are quite beautiful where they depict something eloquently Chinese, such as the Opera or an elegant kite, but inevitably less successful where they compete with the sketches in depicting everyday life. *West Coast Chinese boy* is a sensitive addition to the growing number of Canadian books which capture, in word and picture, that near yet all too distant past in which so many unique Canadian childhoods lie buried.

Judith Terry teaches Children's Literature at the University of Victoria and regularly reviews children's books.

QUIET STRENGTH: BARBARA SMUCKER'S *AMISH ADVENTURE*

Amish adventure, Barbara Smucker. Illus. Caroline Price. Clarke, Irwin, 1983. 144 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-7720-1391-8.

"What's that orange sign? It's moving" yells Jack Turner to twelve-year-old Ian MacDonald. The triangle is on the back of the Amish buggy to caution drivers to slow down, but Turner, going much too fast in a rain storm, cannot stop. He hits the buggy, kills the horse, Star, and cripples the driver, Ezra Bender. Ian MacDonald's Amish adventure begins.

The action and suspense of this early scene in Barbara Smucker's new novel *Amish Adventure* are soon over, but throughout the book Ian continues to respond to the question which was thrown out in the heat of the moment. By living on an Amish farm for two months he begins to "adjust his eyes to a dif-