

# The marriage of pictures and text in *Alligator Pie* and *Nicholas Knock*

Jon C. Stott

In 1974, Macmillan of Canada published companion volumes which became the two best selling Canadian children's books of all time and made their collaborators the two best-known creators of children's books in Canada. *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock and other people* represented a nearly perfect blend of the talents of a poet and illustrator, Dennis Lee and Frank Newfeld. What were the talents and artistic theories of these two men and how were these interrelated in the genesis and production of the two volumes? We shall answer by first looking at Newfeld's statements on the role of an illustrator and then by looking at the poems in each volume, Lee's statements about them, and Newfeld's illustrations and designs which accompany them.

Frank Newfeld did not see the poems for *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock* until they were in their final form and, with one or two exceptions, in the sequences in which they were to appear in the published volumes. Bringing to his task his many years as a book designer and illustrator, he started with a basic premise. As he told me in an interview conducted in Vancouver, in May 1976, during the Pacific Rim Children's Literature Conference, "The book is the author's, not the illustrator's." He knew, in reading Lee's manuscript, that he was dealing with a superb collection of poems, and modestly remarked, "He really didn't need me. However, the publisher did want illustrations."

As a book designer as well as an illustrator, Newfeld approached the collection of poems as a unit. Considering the overall design, he remarked: "I see a book as being like a long concertina which I can pull open. In the initial stages of design, I work out a streamer of thumbnails to get the rhythm going. I always see a page in relation to many pages. In many ways it's like surfing, you have to feel the rhythm of all the waves."

In dealing with individual poems, Newfeld did not try to extend the meanings of the individual poems in the way that an author-illustrator might use his illustrations to expand on his own story. "I didn't want to interrupt the poem. I wanted to let the poet finish the poem and then to let the children look at the picture. It was in many ways like a caption in reverse. For longer poems, the concern was when to let the reader take a breather at the logical time. In many ways, what I was trying to do in the illustrations was to present a reaction to the poems, not an interpretation."

Although the poems for both *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock* developed

over a ten year period in which Lee began creating poems for his own young children, they were separated into two volumes, the first being for younger children and the other for older. In a sense, they are complementary. *Alligator pie* reveals Lee's discovery that in nursery rhythms are contained linguistically the elements of play that are also found in the physical games and body language of young children. *Nicholas Knock* involves the older child's awareness of the conflicts between the inner liberating impulses and the social constraints he feels. Nursery rhymes, Lee has said, "reflect a sense of community, a sense of a stable world, of an at homeness."<sup>1</sup> In their play with words, sound, rhythm, and imagery, they parallel the child's sense of play. While he admired and enjoyed the traditional nursery rhymes, as did his children, he realized that "they were no longer on home ground. . . Shouldn't the child also discover the imagination playing on things she lived with every day? Not abolishing Mother Goose, but letting her take up residence among hockey sticks and high-rise too?"<sup>2</sup>

The thirty-seven poems which make up *Alligator pie* celebrate the play of the young child, the joys of his/her liberated imagination, and, at the same time, the securities of the familiar world. The title poem, which opens the collection, is, in a sense, the child's request or demand to be allowed the freedom of the imagination. The child is willing to give away familiar, everyday things, but not his alligator pie, stew, or soup, for without them he worries he may die, he may droop, and he won't be able to cope. There follow a number of short, chanting poems which, in addition to indulging the child's love of pronounced rhythms and strong rimes, mix the familiar with the marvellous: mailmen, ice cream, rattlesnakes, and an elephant who sits on the speaker. However, in "Billy Batter" and "Ookpik," a new tone is added. In the former, the child is worried at the loss of his parents and relieved at their return; in the latter, the title character becomes a symbol of imaginative freedom, dancing on Niagara Falls and whistling on walls. Security is the theme of "The special person" and "Like a giant in a towel," while the liberty of the child is highlighted in "Flying out of holes." "Tricking" deals with a child's imagined sense of superiority over his father who, in actuality, has tricked the youngster into eating dinner. Foolish adults are laughed at in "Higgledy piggledy" and "Nicholas Grouch." The young narrator laughingly criticizes the foolish child in "Psychapoo" and feels superior to adults in the mixed-up cumulative rhyme "On Tuesdays I polish my uncle." "Peter Rabbit" suffers for his refusal to learn to eat from a spoon. In "The friends," the narrator explains how he incurs much trouble for the sake of his imaginary companion. The volume closes with a sense of security in "Windshield wipers," the musings of a sleepy child being returned home late at night. This brief summary indicates the main themes. Although we have not noted all of the poems, we have listed our examples in order so that we may see the continuity of the themes as Lee develops them through the book.

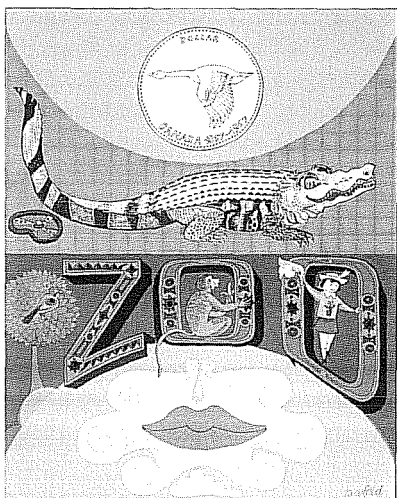
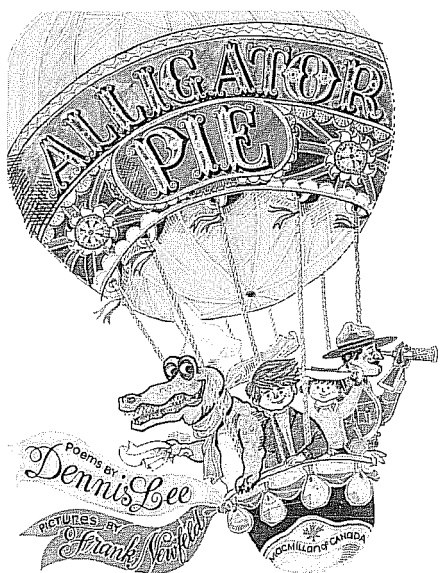
How does Newfeld visually reinforce and respond to the unity and continuity he has found in the collection? To answer this question we shall consider first the preliminary illustrations, second the recurrent imagery found in the book, and finally the illustrations for specific poems. The cover illustration presents a gaily colored balloon carrying four passengers: an alligator, two children, and a mountie. All look happy as they float upward and forward, an indication, perhaps, of the liberation found in the book. The alligator will be seen in the preliminary pages and in the title poem, the two children are seen in later illustrations, and the mountie has a miniature part in one of the later pictures. The green of the end-papers is appropriately colored, not only for alligators, but also for the natural freshness of the child's spirit and imagination, which is to be celebrated in the volume. On the half-title page, a boy wearing a chef's hat and safari shirt, carrying a butterfly net, and smiling confidently wanders through a flowery jungle. Turning to the title page, we see what he is doing. He has a rope around an alligator, whom he is leading out of a swampy pond. On the dedication page, the alligator has opened his mouth and is emitting a series of vapors fashioned into decorated swirls. If, as we have suggested, the title poem represents the child's plea for imaginative freedom, the preliminary illustrations have prepared us for it. The boy is in control. Significantly, he is not using his butterfly net — symbolically, he is not trying to trap the butterfly of the soul. Instead, he is helping the alligator from the depths so that the alligator can breathe freely. Perhaps, the alligator, in emerging from the pond, is releasing long repressed feelings. Perhaps he is now ready to engage in play. Perhaps the alligator pie referred to in the title is not made out of a dead alligator, but is created by him as he liberates his feelings. Perhaps he, with the boy's help, is creating the poems which follow.

Newfeld reinforces the continuity of the volume through a series of recurrent images which provide not only visual, but also thematic links between the poems. The chief of these are circles, arcs, and swirls. The dominant circle is the sun, seen in the illustration of "Bump your thumb," a celebration of Jimmy who is the "king of the little kid's swing," of the girl in "Flying out of holes" who has extricated herself and now sails above the earth, and of the boy in "If you should meet" who has controlled and tamed such creatures as the grundiboob. In each case, the sun illuminates their achievement, their escapes from limitations. Sometimes circles can represent confinement. In the illustration for "Flying out of holes," the trapped girl is depicted in three small circles at the top of the page. In "Higgledy piggedly" the men suffering from mumps and measles are depicted as busts enclosed in green circles.

Arcs are of two kinds. Rainbows are seen in the illustrations for "Bouncing song" and "Ookpik." In the former, they highlight the three ice cream cones which are triumphantly announced in the last line; in the latter, they are above the owl who looks down on the mists of Niagara. In several poems they form the top of the encircling border, contributing to an overall sense of security.

Swirls are found in nine of the poems, encircling Casa Loma, encompassing the shell of a snail, forming the waves on which a whale swims and the mists of Niagara, curling from the rays of the sun shining on Jimmy as he swings, surrounding the bed of a sleepy child, and rising from the bed of a fantasizing child. With the exception of the last example, all of them reinforce a reassuring tone. They all suggest the vitality conveyed by the speakers of the poems.

The illustrations for two poems exemplify Newfeld's method of using his art as caption and reaction to a specific piece. "I found a silver dollar" describes how a child was unable to use several discoveries. In the concluding two lines, he/she states: "Then I found a sticky kiss and so/I brought it home to you." The balance of the illustration reinforces the sense of fulfillment reached in the poem. In a blue semi-circle at the top is a silver dollar and at the bottom in another blue semi-circle is a full pair of pink lips. Money is opposed to love; the goose in the coin is flying to the left of the page, backward we might say. The lips look forward, offering their fullness to the recipient, the "you" of the poem. In between are the alligator and the monkey, neither of which faces forward. In the second "o" of "zoo" a little girl looks forward, waving to the reader, a prefiguration of the final direction of the poem.



Significantly, there is no illustration to accompany the book's final poem, "windshield wipers." Newfeld has wisely allowed the simple words to create their own effect. As in the final page of Maurice Sendak's *Where the wild things are*, the unadorned words are in themselves sufficient.

If *Nicholas Knock and other people* is a companion volume to *Alligator pie*, it is also a contrasting one, visually and verbally. Lee has noted that underlying *Nicholas Knock* is the question: "Can we sustain play, joy, or any of the deeper and more vibrant modes of being which tantalize us?"<sup>3</sup> The answer is, at best, a very qualified yes. More often than not repression and restriction impede movement towards fulfillment. The vibrant aspects of life are symbolized by Ookpik who, in the opening poem, "Ookpik and the animals," acts as a liberator, releasing a number of animals from the zoo. In the penultimate poem, the speaker addresses his plea to Ookpik:

Ookpik,	Ookpik,
Ookpik	Ookpik
Dance with	By your
Us,	Grace,
Till our	Help us
Lives	Live in
Go	Our own
Luminous.	Space.

Unlike *Alligator pie* which began with a plea and then went on to celebrate life and play, *Nicholas Knock* concludes with one, an indication of lack of fulfillment. Indeed, the final poems of the two volumes reinforce the contrast. "Windshield wipers" concludes *Alligator pie* with a sense of sleepy contentment. On the other hand, "You too lie down," including as it does the phrase, "you too can sleep at last," seems to emphasize the need rather than the joy of rest.

Although friendship is the theme of many poems, including "With my foot in my mouth," "The cat and the wizard," and "The question," the strongest poems in the collection deal with the failure of individuals to achieve full relationships with unusual creatures who represent what Lee has called the "emissaries of larger life."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Hoobody, who helps children release their repressions, disappears when a young child deliberately searches for him. In "The thing," three boys lead a tormented Ancient Mariner-like existence, after they have refused to acknowledge the strange creature who, they later realize, had wanted friendship and "to be." In the title poem, Nicholas Knock had a mind with "funny edges," a quality, it seems, which enabled him to make contact with the silver honkabeest, a creature symbolizing imaginative power and integrity. However, the adults, denying that such a being can exist, send him to psychologists and finally to the Supreme Court, where he is sentenced to death by beheading for his firm insistence on the reality of the honkabeest. Although he remains firm and faithful to his vision, he no longer sees the honkabeest, and now wanders on Bloor Street searching for it. He is at once an admirable and pathetic person. Not surprisingly, in this and other of the poems, adults are the repressive figures, seemingly determined to make sure that "shades of the prison-house [shall] close upon the growing boy."

The visual contrasts between *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock* are immediately evident. There is no full color, full page cover illustration. Instead, in the corner of the orange cloth cover, a hooded executioner stands, his arms folded over an enormous axe. Beside him, the chopping block bears the inscription, "For Nicholas." Rather than a vibrant green, the endpapers are a dull brown, prefiguring the color which will be used in the monochromatic illustrations to follow. On the half-title page, two brightly colored half-circles are above and below the title, which is in gray. On the title page, Nicholas, in orange, floats alone between the half-circles. We find nowhere the gaiety, the sense of exploration, or the idea of the child being in control of his destiny that we found in the preliminary material to *Alligator pie*. Instead, there are notes of punishment, containment, and dullness.

While the motifs of circles and arcs are found in *Nicholas Knock* as well as in *Alligator pie*, the circles most often create impressions of confinement. For example, in "Ookpik and the animals," five animals are crowded together under the arched gate of The Zoological Gardens; all wear worried looks on their faces. In "Forty mermaids," Captain Kidd rows his boat under a rainbow arch,

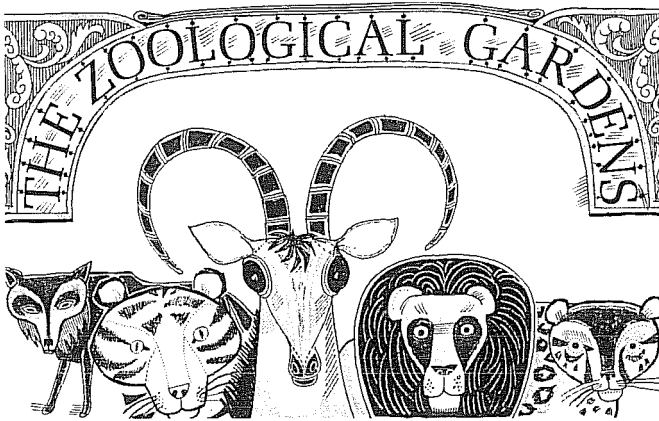


Fig. 3

but any sense of happiness and freedom is negated by the evil leer he wears on his face and the cluttered, almost cramped quality of the sea before him. The texts for "There was a man" and "The difficulty of living on other planets," both about failure, are encompassed by arches. The only arch which suggests fulfillment is that made by the tail of the peacock in "The cat and the wizard." This illustration illustrates the moment in the text when the wizard is performing magic for his new-found friend. There are only two suns in the illustrations, one of which is in a monochromatic illustration and looks down on Nicholas's angular Victorian house. However, in "With my foot in my mouth," the theme of friendship is emphasized by the large circle behind the two boys, who have their arms over each other's shoulders.

The sense of loneliness which is found in individual poems and which, in fact, pervades the volume is emphasized by the fact that there is only a single living figure in seventeen of the illustrations. Unlike the happy group in the balloon in *Alligator pie*, the cover of *Nicholas Knock* has, as we have seen, only the executioner. Ookpik (twice), Rasputin, Mr. Hoobody, Wellington the Skeleton, the Abominable Fairy of Bloor Street, Oil Can Harry, and, of course, Nicholas are just a few of these solitary figures. Even when there is more than one on a page, as in the illustrations for "Going up north," "There was a man," "The thing," and "I have my father's eyes," the impression created is not one of harmony and happiness.

The illustrations for "Nicholas Knock," the longest and, in the opinion of many, finest poem in the book, reveal Newfeld's ability to use color, design, and spacing at its best. There are eight illustrations spaced through the poem. Six are brown and brown dominates the other two, as is appropriate to the generally somber tone. The rectangle is the dominant figure, serving as border for five of the pictures; a near rectangle surrounds another. Like the illustrations, Nicholas is boxed in; at least, the adults of the poem attempt to box him in. The first illustration, appearing at the head of the poem, presents Nicholas' house. Although the sun shines down and an ice cream truck is on the street, the house is grimly angular, the trees are bare, and there is no sign of life either in the house or yard. Nicholas is, no doubt, out for one of his "walks in the universe"; that he generally "got home late" is no surprise, given the sterile quality of the environment which should be home.

Newfeld places the second illustration between Parts Three and Four, after Nicholas has met the honkabeest (which neither we nor the adults in the poem are permitted or able to see) and has been severely reprimanded by his parents and neighbors. Nicholas appears to be floating freely, in a semi-reclining position, his hands raised in a gesture which may imply, "What's the use?" or "What's next?" The illustration may indicate both the liberation the honkabeest has given Nicholas or the isolation in which he exists in relation to other people. Part Five, in which Nicholas is examined by a variety of specialists and then led off to the Supreme Court for refusing to deny his friend, is enclosed by two long rectangular illustrations, both with solid brown backgrounds. To the left, three doctors scowl and gesture threateningly towards the boy, while above them appear in large black letters the words "kill it dead!" To the right, a policeman pushes Nicholas away, while beneath them appear, again in large letters, this time blue, the words, "HIS TIME IS SHORT, TAKE HIM AWAY, TO THE SUPREME COURT." The pressures of the adults surround Nicholas as the illustrations surround the text. Threatening and domineering though they are, however, the boy continues to murmur, "No." The pressure continues at court, and the illustration to the right of Part Six shows a grotesque judge, with the words "SILENCE! POPPYCOCK INSOLENT!" above him. Again, the background is brown. At the end of this section is repeated the illustration

of the solitary executioner first seen on the cover. He is a grim visual reinforcement of what will happen to Nicholas if he defies the adult world by being faithful to his own vision. In Part Seven, the judge calls out the navy, the army, the Mounted Police, the bailiff and the sheriff, to safeguard "our children" by destroying the creature. Across the bottom of two pages, a variety of military personnel advance across the page, all firing their weapons. What the four illustrations have done is to reinforce the sense of the incredible pressure which is being brought to bear against Nicholas, but which he steadfastly opposes. There is no illustration of the lonely Nicholas patrolling Bloor Street searching for his friend. Instead, the final illustration, a small one at the end of the poem, is of a gavel. At first, it might seem to be reinforcing the idea of adult power seen before. More probably, it is meant to emphasize the command given by the poet to the reader in the last two lines: If you should see Nicholas, "Don't bother him! He's hunting for/A silver honkabeest."

In the interview referred to above, Frank Newfeld noted that he did not meet Dennis Lee until after he had finished illustrating the two books of poetry. This separateness, he felt, was valuable. "An illustrator can't be used just as a pair of hands and an author can be used just as a voice." He remarked that *Alligator pie* and *Nicholas Knock* were books created out of two emotional responses. He went on to say that there are, in fact, in each of the volumes, really four books, "Lee's, his own, the synthesis which is the physical volume, and the emotional and aesthetic response of the reader to words and pictures."<sup>5</sup> That the fourth book has been an enormous success is attested by the enthusiastic responses of critics, other adults, and thousands of children across Canada. What is important to remember is that this fourth book could not have existed without the third book, a book which is a superb marriage of the talents of author and illustrator, Dennis Lee and Frank Newfeld.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Dennis Lee, conducted by Jon C. Stott, Vancouver, B.C., May 1976.

<sup>2</sup>"Hockey sticks and high-rise, a postlude" in *Alligator pie*, by Dennis Lee, Ill. by Frank Newfeld (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>Dennis Lee, "Roots and play: writing as a 35-year-old children," *Canadian Children's Literature*, 4 (1976), 50.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Dennis Lee, May 1976.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Frank Newfeld, Vancouver, B.C., May 1976.

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