

Guest editorial: Illustrating children's books

"Pictures speak louder than words" is an obvious platitude ungrammatically expressed, yet it does contain a kernel of truth. When we choose books for younger children, we are influenced as much by the pictures as the text; we and our audience agree with Lewis Carroll's Alice: "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" The aesthetic quality of the book is important. Arthur Rackham, one of the greatest English illustrators, believed that in their most impressionable years children should be given the most stimulating and educative pictures and writings for they are blind neither to "decorative or arbitrarily designed treatment in art" nor to "poetic or rhythmic form in literature. . . nothing less than the best that can be had, cost what it may (and it can hardly be cheap) is good enough for those early impressionable years when standards are formed for life."

During the past twenty years in Canada we have seen a considerable production of quality picture books that combine authentic Canadian content with beautiful and witty illustrations. Ann Blades' *Mary of Mile 18* and William Toye and Elizabeth Cleaver's *How summer came to Canada* were pioneers of the type. Canadian picture books have won numerous prizes at such prestigious international fairs as those held in Leipzig and Bologna, have been translated into at least forty languages and have been acclaimed by foreign critics. Often they have not been so commercially successful at home as they deserve — perhaps because, as Rackham said, beautiful books can hardly be cheap. Or can they? Tundra Books of Montreal last year initiated "The Tundra Collection of Children's Books as Works of Art", reproducing in reasonably priced paperbacks books which have an international reputation. Oxford also has paperback editions of outstanding works.

Not that we have any reason to be complacent! We are still producing a good many picture books that are boring, imitative, and ugly; books that use the blatantly aggressive techniques of television commercials; books that have been published because they deal with "socially relevant" problems or conform to the latest paedagogical theories. Some of these mediocre books have been reviewed in this issue. Our contributors, being polite people, have generally couched their negative criticisms in euphemistic terms. However, one of them sent along an alternative review written by her son, an assessment which it would have been interesting to print were it not libellous.

May Cutler, President of Tundra and the most discriminating publisher in the field, believes that Canadians dislike original work. "They hate it and you

are presenting them with a problem. . . The only thing Canadians feel secure about are imitations, good imitations, but imitations none the less. If they see or feel something they know has been successful elsewhere, then it must be good." Certainly, a lack of discrimination is apparent everywhere, from the bookstore shelves which are almost entirely filled with the gaudy products of American popular presses to the Canada Council's Children's Book Awards.

In this special issue of *CCL* we have tried to provide a variety of perspectives on the subject: those of authors, illustrators, primary teachers, professors of English, French, Art History and Education, librarians, parents, and the children themselves. Ann Blades and Ginette Anfousse describe the process of creating picture books, while reviewers analyze the products of that creative process. Other contributors examine the relationship between childhood experience and adult art, the richness of Canadian myth and folklore as a picture book source, the response of children in isolated Arctic communities to particular books, the sense of place and a successful author-artist collaboration.

Having looked at a considerable number of picture books, can we discern a characteristic Canadian style? The answer seems to be "No". Because of regional and ethnic diversity, it is probably not possible to create pictures that represent the whole of Canada. On the contrary, it is books focussing on a particular locale — Kurelek's prairies, Harrison's Yukon, Bailey's Montreal, Tibo's Québec countryside — that seem most authentically Canadian. Several of our best illustrators are Canadian by adoption rather than birth and they have brought with them images and techniques that enrich our culture.

The best Canadian picture books are a sure defense against boredom. They provide readers of every age with evocative images of beauty, humour, nostalgia, fear, anger, work, play, reassurance and love.

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