

## NUTRITIOUS PAP?

*The rude visitors*, Gail Chislett. Illus. Barbara Di Lella. Annick Press, 1984. 27 pp. \$10.95, \$4.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-920236-74-X, 0-920236-69-3; *Wise Eye the crafty cat*, Margaret Bunel Edwards. Illus. Rose Zgodzinski. Three Trees Press, 1983. 46 pp. \$11.95, \$4.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-88823-073-7, 0-88823-072-9; *When you were little and I was big*, Priscilla Galloway. Illus. Heather Collins. Annick Press, 1984. 29 pp. \$10.95, \$4.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-920236-84-7, 0-920236-71-5; *If I had a birthday every day*, C.H. Gervais. Illus. Ed. Roach. Black Moss Press, 1983. 30 pp. \$7.95, \$3.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-88753-102-4, 0-88753-101-6; *How to get rid of bad dreams*, Nancy Hazbry. Illus. Roy Condy. Scholastic-TAB, 1983. 32pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71174-1; *Woosh! I hear a sound*, Emily Hearn. Illus. Heather Collins. Annick Press, 1983. 32 pp. \$10.95, \$4.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-920236-58-8, 0-920236-59-6; *Barnaby bear*, Margaret Leon. Illus. Linda Leon. Penumbra Press, 1983. 28 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920-806-42-2; *The man who loved his knees*, bp Nichol. Black Moss Press, 1983. 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-104-0; *The discontented hippopotamus*, Stella Russell. Illus. Linda Russell. Harry Cuff Publications, 1982. 12 pp. \$1.95 paper. ISBN 0-919095-31-3; *Amie & Anika; a story about being sisters*, Terry Stafford. Children's Studio Books, 1983. Unpaginated. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-9691404-0-1; *Nobody*, Meguido Zola and Angela Dereume. Illus. Wendy Wolsak. Pemmican Publications, 1983. 32 pp. \$4.00 paper. ISBN 0-919143-38-5.

Some children's books make the adult reviewer feel very old. These stories for pre-school-age children made me wonder if I'd become more ancient than medievalism or so adult that I had locked up childish things. Is it misguided, I had to ask myself, to look for the same features in children's stories that we like in our own: that is, narrative control, deft characterization and some form of creative tension? Or is interest merely a reflection of age and, therefore, evidence of the distance between adult and child? Despite the sobriety of this internal debate, I still cherished memories of my own wonderful first books about gnomes and fairies, trolls and ogres. They were absolutely engrossing, as I recall, because they seemed to have little to do with my everyday world of eating, playing and discovering new corners in our house. Much later, of course, it was a comfort to nod approvingly at Dr. Johnson's pronouncement to Mrs. Thrale, that "babies do not want to hear about babies; they like to be told of giants and castles. . ." But, grudgingly, I also had to concede the good sense of other observations, not as agreeable in their reflections on adults, such as John Earle's characterization of the child's sports:

His game is our earnest; and his drums, rattles, and hobby-horses, but the emblems and mocking of man's business. His father hath writ him as his own little story, wherein

he reads those days of his life that he cannot remember, and sighs to see what innocence he has outlived. (*Microcosmography*, 1633)

Because I happened to have been re-reading Johnson and Earle before the package of eleven books arrived, their views kept impinging on the criticism and funnelling my own reactions into one of two directions. On the one hand, I wondered where the excitement had gone in these pedestrian accounts of bad dreams, breastfed siblings, truant toys and exchanged roles. On the other, remembering that “his game is our earnest,” I had to admit ruefully that adult experience often blinds and ill-equips us to understand what really matters to a child.

Judicious though I try to be, it is hard to accept the prominence of the practical, the prosaic and, too often, the saccharine in these stories. While none qualifies, in my eyes at least, as great or outstanding, some are clearly more impressive than others.

Because of their uncluttered story line, adroit handling of episodes within the child’s ken and widely varying illustrations, the best of the lot are *The man who loved his knees*, *When you were little and I was big* and *Woosh! I hear a sound*. Poet bp Nichol provides text and illustration for *The man who loved his knees*, the likeably fanciful tale of George’s infatuation. Although George is devastated by the mocking laughter of a stranger, who declares that “knees are ugly,” he finds some solace in a flowerbed, where one of the flowers — “a flower by birth but a weed by inclination” — makes him realize how lucky he is to have knees and not to be confined “in the same bed day after day.” George transplants his helper to a pot and carries it as a talisman everywhere. This summary makes the story sound very instructive, a conclusion underscored by the closing sentence:

And he loved his knees much more than before because of what they could do for others.

But drollery is also at work, lightening the moral and charming the reader. The bizarre choice of subject — which likely seems so only to the adult who has forgotten childish fixations — and the mood-capturing black and white illustrations, an apparent combination of crayon, wash and electric lighting, which appear opposite each page of text, allow this story to transcend the ordinary.

Both *When you were little and I was big*, with text by Priscilla Galloway, and *Woosh! I hear a sound*, with text by Emily Hearn, are illustrated by Heather Collins whose handsome, coloured, detailed work contributes largely to their success. The first is the more demanding story, a little girl’s report of what it would be like if she were mummy and Mummy were the child. The inferred sub-text reveals the warmth uniting mother and daughter as they play doctor, unroll all the toilet paper, search the garden for a hippopotamus family and stay up late to watch TV on Saturday night. Since this is a family where Daddy has “had to go away,” their closeness is a positive affirmation of strength.

Collins' illustrations carry the book, believably transposing mother's clothes and hair to the young narrator and depicting the parent in the child's garb. The transference makes for amusing, but never belittling, pictures. To remind the reader (or viewer) of the guiding pretext under which this "story" is told, Collins includes a two-tone sketch of mother and daughter beside each page of text, as the prelude and contrast to the full-page, multi-tone transposition scene. She uses a similar formula of chromatic contrast in *Woosh! I hear a sound*. With only one exception, the toddler's question about each sound is complemented by a two-tone drawing, while the imagined explanation as well as the plausible revelation of the source are presented along with full-page, vibrantly coloured illustrations.

The second level of books in this batch are those with a promising story line which, however, lacks some of the aplomb of the first three. Gail Chislett's *The rude visitors* and C.H. Gervais' *If I had a birthday every day* are humorous problem solvers. Chislett's toddler-hero, Bram, relies on his own imaginary animal entourage to account for such mysteries as the mess on the kitchen floor, spilled milk and soup and wet pants. An accommodating hippo (by far the most popular beast in pre-school books), elephant, cow and rabbit satisfy the child's curiosity — even if they don't convince his perpetually understanding "Mom." The story and Barbara Di Lella's expressive but unengaging art work run perilously close to coyness. A much more enjoyable silliness characterizes Gervais' extension of an eight-year-old's hypothesis about the joys of having a birthday every day. The "absolutely fantastic" prospect of daily presents soon fades as the aging speaker comes to more and more alarming realizations, all conveyed in Gervais' deadpan style:

You know, by June when school was out, I'd probably be 250 years old, and I'd still be in Grade 3. Maybe 4 if I passed.

The downhill slope is carefully iced for this dreamer.

I'd probably not look all that great either. I'd probably be so old I'd trip at recess, fall on the ground and hurt my head or my arm or legs. Soccer would definitely be out. So would baseball. Even marbles. I wouldn't even be able to bend down and pick them up.

Ed Roach's simple, two-tone cartoon drawings of this beleaguered Father Time are wry but unobtrusive comments on the main proposition. My only disappointment arises from the deliberate pedagogy of the story's ending.

Maybe being 8 years old is okay after all. Maybe having a birthday ONCE a year has its advantages. Don't you think so?

The third rung down the ladder is occupied by those books in which not enough happens or gets resolved, or in which the happenings and resolutions are im-

probable, namely, Margaret Leon's *Barnaby bear*, Terry Stafford's *Amie & Anika*, Meguido Zola and Angela Dereume's *Nobody* and Nancy Hazbry's *How to get rid of bad dreams*. Barnaby is a teddy bear who falls out of his little owner's window and remains lodged on a tree branch for a whole year; when a March wind blows him back through the window, he is greeted with this stilted welcome:

"Oh look!" cried Penny. "Barnaby has come home!"

Even basal readers have progressed beyond such woodenness. The boldly coloured illustrations by the storyteller's daughter, Linda, are pleasant but unexceptional; they remind the viewer of junior-school bulletin boards. Terry Stafford is a gifted illustrator, able to impart a keen realism to the charcoal sketches which accompany her story of two sisters, *Amie & Anika*. Despite the promotional blurb's claim about "a gently exuberant story" which "shows Amie assuming a valuable role in her sister's growing up," the book is not a narrative but a series of poignant moments caught in charcoal rather than on Polaroid film. References to the comforting availability of "Mommy-juice" are frequent in this book which is endorsed by the La Leche League. Although Wendy Wolsak's charcoal drawings lend humour and vitality to *Nobody*, the story itself, a harried mother's attempts to find the culprit responsible for "a bundle of mischief," is little more than a catalogue of improbabilities couched in Mama's awkward questions. Pranksterism becomes tedious after a string of queries like these:

Just who tipped out your giant, see-through glass, 500 worker-ant farm all over my kitchen counter?

And just who let Fang out the front door and left him sitting on the pizza delivery-boy right through "Hockey Night in Canada"?

Just who put a wad of gum inside Papa's work boots? And tied the laces together — just the one morning he was already late for work?

To the growing list of distractions — woodenness, uneventfulness and improbability — *How to get rid of bad dreams* adds the demon cuteness, as it enumerates "funny ways" to make "scary monsters" disappear. Not only are the methods suggested not funny, they can also be silly, menacing and vile. Encountering various "monsters," readers are directed to "pull your shrink-ray laser out of your belt and fire until the dragon shrivels to the size of a kitten" or "whip out a can of silver paint and spray it all over the bugs." Other suggestions, like sipping "from the bottle of reducing potion in your knapsack" or borrowing "a feather from your pet parrot," try to be exotic and end up sounding only calculated. That the accompanying flyer from Scholastic Publications, addressed to teachers of Grades 1 to 3, advertises this misch-masch as "humorous," "appealing" and "ingenious" strikes me as an acutely depressing situation.

Thankfully there are no blurbs to be discounted in Margaret Edwards' *Wise Eye the crafty cat* and Stella Russell's *The discontented hippopotamus*. The former is an overlong fable showing the cunning of Wise Eye; it is particularly difficult to keep this book open because the shaded line drawings by Rose Zgodzinski create little sense of movement or beauty and also because the central figure supposedly enralls his followers with utterances such as "'Don't you know that every cat has nine lives?'" "'There is always more than one way to do things when you put your mind to it.'" This leaden predictability afflicts the whole story. The problems with *The discontented hippopotamus* are the most serious of all: poorly laid out pages, static black and white drawings and a chattily related story that purports to be an explanation of why "Mother Nature" gave the animal "such a hard-to-pronounce name." Nothing happens: nothing compels the reader's or viewer's attention; like its title character, the book remains "an old stick-in-the-mud."

What conclusions can be drawn from this current crop of books for preschoolers? Still inclined to agree with Dr. Johnson, I think it's time to issue a challenge to publishers and consumers to refuse to print or buy mediocre and mismanaged stories, to insist on beauty, intelligence and wit in the narratives they do chose, and thus to introduce youngsters, in the best possible way, to the delight of words.

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#### LITERARY, AND ENFORCER, LIONS HAVE A PLACE IN THE BEDROOM

*Lizzy's lion*, Dennis Lee. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart, 1984. 28 pp. \$8.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-0078-1.

Perhaps there was a bit of a *literary* lion lurking in the thicket of publishing decisions for the rhyming story of *Lizzy's Lion* — and justifying the quite luxurious thicket it comes with.

It is Dennis Lee's "first storybook in verse" and the publisher has spared little expense in its presentation. There's space — one four-line verse for every two-page spread — full-colour illustration by Marie-Louise Gay on each spread, high-quality bond pages, and a full-colour glossy hard cover.

Children and parents convinced of Dennis Lee's poetic quality will find that this book is an appropriate match physically. There is a price, of course — the \$8.95, which, for the sheer poetry of it, is for one not-too-long poem of 14 verses,