

ILLUSTRATION AND TEXT

The leopard & the lily, Joan Clark. Illus. Velma Foster. Oolichan Books, 1984. 40 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88982-078-3; *Orff, 27 dragons (and a snarkell)*, Betty Waterton. Illus. Karen Kulyk. Annick Press, 1984. 28 pp. \$12.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-920303-02-1, 0-920303-03-X; *Snowfeather*, Cecil Gagnon. Trans. Valerie Hepburn Craig. Illus. author. James Lorimer, 1981. Reprinted 1938. 16 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-524-3; *There's an alligator under my bed!*, Gail E. Gill. Illus. Veronika Martenova Charles. Three Trees Press, 1984. 24 pp. \$11.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88823-089-3, 0-88823-087-7; *Tootle*, Johan Sarrazin. Illus. Aislin. Tundra Books, 1984. 24 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-168-2; *What is that noise?*, Michele Lemieux. Trans. David Ross. Illus. author. Methuen, 1984. 30 pp. \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 0-416-49450-1.

Six recently published "picture books," all written for the young child, indicate a wide range in the quality of their text and illustration. This range is not surprising in an industry which has grown as quickly as that of Canadian children's publishing. Johan Sarrazin's *Tootle* which creatively and charmingly combines story and picture represents one end of that range while Joan Clark's *The leopard and the lily* and Gail E. Gill's *There's an alligator under my bed* indicate some of the weaknessess at the other end: both language and drawing fail to captivate the reader in Clark's fable for children; Gail E. Gill's illustrator, Veronika Martenova Charles, lacking a basic skill in depicting the human figure and face, prevents an effective coming together of the artistic and literary aspects of that children's picture book. The other three books fall somewhere in between this range. In *Snowfeather*, Cecil Gagnon combines bright illustration with a simple story to create a book which appeals to child and adult both. Michele Lemieux illustrates her own story with beautiful drawings, making *What is that noise?* a pleasure to look at and to read. Betty Waterton's *Orff* is adequate both in its story and its drawings but lacks a strong creative edge. These six books, published by six different houses, suggest that Tundra Books, Methuen, James Lorimer, and Annick Press continue to maintain their reputations for publishing some of the best of Canadian children's books.

Of the six titles listed, Joan Clark's *The leopard and the lily* deserves the harshest criticism. On the back jacket we read that this little book is written "in the tradition of great children's classics" embodying "such themes as growth and change, imagination and feeling, alienation and friendship." The aims of both author and illustrator are not at question; however, the book lacks control. Clark, in telling the story of an old black leopard that is locked in his cage in a zoo and later befriended by a mysterious young girl, uses the language and conventions of poetry. But the use of symbol, and the repetition of phrase, idea, and image do not guarantee a literary "classic."

Clark's fable smacks of pretentiousness and will irritate the adult reader with its clichéd imagery: we read that the lily "blinded the leopard with its whiteness," that "cruel pebbles cut the little girl's knees." In spite of some of the problems with language in this short fable, the adult reader can appreciate Clark's attempt to imbue a children's story with the layered meanings possible with symbolic description. Unfortunately, *The leopard and the lily* is too cryptic for children — it is, in fact, somewhat of a puzzle even for the adult. The young child (three to six) loses interest very early in the story.

The illustrations, largely black and white with a sketchy appearance, contribute to this lack of interest. Velma Foster's drawings, of the leopard in particular, are repetitious. The use of patterned backgrounds contribute to this repetitiousness (fig. 1). The quality of colour, where used, lacks vibrancy, a fault which has more to do with the printing process and the funds available to the publication of Clark's book than with Foster's technique. It is Foster's use of a stylized calligraphy that works well with Clark's text. The jacket design, especially, captures the promise of a well-told fable — a promise that Joan Clark does not keep.

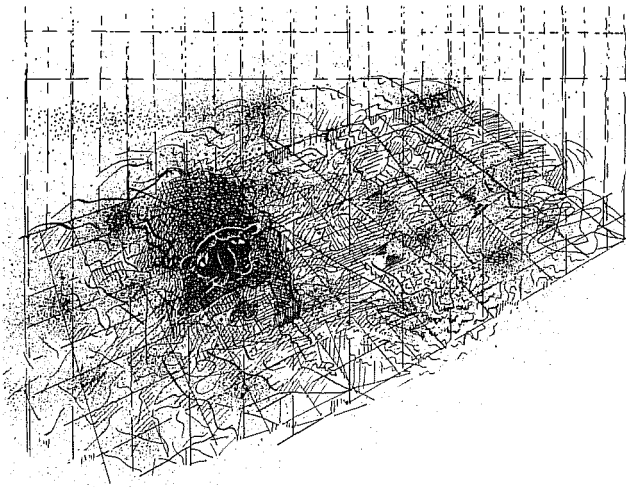


Fig. 1

Cecile Gagnon's *Snowfeather* stands in contrast to the Clark story. Gagnon illustrates her own text with bold and colourful full-page drawings which complement the simple story line about young Stephanie who creates a snowman and snowdog, both of which come to life. Though not altogether original in view of the "Frosty-the-snowman" tale, Gagnon's straight-forward text and twists in the fates of "Snowfeather" and the dog offer the young child a story to enjoy and to wonder about. In its simplicity, this story portrays a girl who is emotional and caring as well as creative and industrious. Stephanie is able to motivate herself to act even after the disappointment she experiences, first

when Snowfeather leaves and again when her snowdog runs off. How thrilled is the child who learns that Snowfeather returns to live in the snowhouse Stephanie builds!

The type and the vocabulary appeal to young readers. Large, clear, soft blue lettering make the words easy to look at and easy to read. The vocabulary, though simple for the most part, introduces a young reader to less common words such as "persisted" and "heartbroken" within a context that makes them simple too. Description of "The dog with the stubby tail and floppy ears" and word pictures of "the old hat on the table and the green scarf on the bench" indicate the kind of precision in language that contributes to a young child's early listening and reading skills. Valerie Hepburn Craig, who translated Gagnon's book from French to English, deserves some of the praise for a children's story well told.

The four remaining books of the six listed above all share a theme which involves some form of self-discovery; a theme that benefits all young readers by reaffirming a child's self-image, boosting a child's self-esteem. Sarrazin's *Tootle* and Betty Waterton's *Orff, 27 dragons (and a snarkell!)* directly deal with self-esteem. In both stories the central character comes to discover that being different does not mean being inferior. A dog called Tootle wants to know when he will be able to "walk on two legs"; a dragon named Orff bemoans the fact that he is the only dragon without wings. Both discover the strengths in their differences.

The illustrations are as much a part of the story-telling in *Tootle* as are the words. This is how it should be in children's picture books. Aislin — the pen-name used by Terry Mosher, political cartoonist — brings a humour and charm to every page of Sarrazin's story. Never has a dog portrayed so much of the human spectrum of emotion. Adult and child alike chuckle at the look in Tootle's eyes as he tries to act human (fig. 2); at the expression on his face as he discovers that there are drawbacks to walking on only two feet. Like Foster's illustrations in *The leopard and the lily*, Aislin's are in black and white. But Aislin's drawings capture the contrast and dramatic patterning possible in black and white illustration. And as consciously as a good writer uses a particular phrase or convention, Aislin uses the contrast and patterning to emphasize the humour and characterization in Sarrazin's story. Aislin's one weakness as an illustrator for a child's book is his depiction of the adult human face, which ironically is his strength as political cartoonist. Unfortunately, his adults are too severe for the mood captured elsewhere in the drawings and the text.

The skill with which Sarrazin tells her story about Tootle should not be overshadowed by praise for the illustrations. As mentioned, it is the creative match between story-teller and illustrator that makes this a successful children's picture book. Sarrazin knowingly has Tootle worry about things with which the young child can easily identify. Before the guests arrive for a party given by Tootle's owner the reader is told that Tootle "has already had a bath. . . He

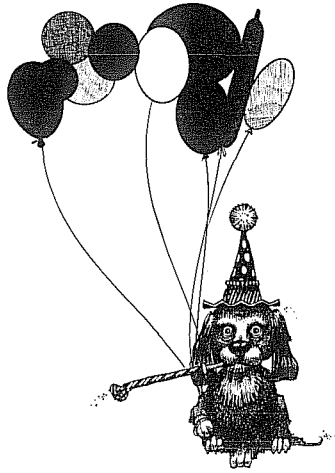


Fig. 2

is nervous about this party. He will be the only one there on four legs. Will they like him?" Sarrazin not only shows her young readers that Tootle is fine just the way he is, that his ability to walk on four legs is in many ways a benefit, but she has the one child among the many adults in the book help Tootle with his discovery. The author's economy of words in a story that says so much combined with the illustrator's conscious choice of design and expression in each picture tempts the reader to go back to the book again and again.

Betty Waterton's story about Orff, the dragon that could not fly, does not share the sense of design or the economy of expression that contribute to the effectiveness of *Tootle*. Yet Waterton tells an interesting story about a creature who, faced with being different, is able to discover his own special abilities. Unable to fly, Orff learns that he can, instead, swim. One unsettling aspect of the conclusion, however, is the suggestion that the creature could not exist with the other dragons. He had to leave his mother, move to another "world," and live with other creatures in order to find happiness.

Each page of text on the left faces a full-page coloured illustration on the right. In spite of their colour, Karen Kulyk's drawings are dull and lack a strong sense of style. Although the drawings correspond to the story-line, they fail to add to the characterization of the creature, Orff. The reader is left with the impression that Waterton's story fails to attain a high level of either artistic or literary style.

A similar impression is made by Gill's *There's an alligator under my bed!* The story, however, appeals to the young child's sense of fear and excitement. Kevin believes that an alligator — a man-eating alligator — lives under his bed. He overcomes his fear only when, thinking his younger sister is in danger, he faces the dark space there. Gill tells the story simply and with sensitive attention paid to the dialogue between Kevin and his mother. The reader watches

a small boy, faced with a problem, attempt to solve it. Although the story, itself, is not strongly original or creative, the book fails in its appeal primarily because of the inadequate skill of the illustrator. The unattractive combination of white, grey, and lime green colouring emphasizes this lack of skill.

The marvelous illustrations in Michele Lemieux's book *What is that noise?*, indicate how important artistic ability is to the children's picture book. Lemieux, like Waterton and Gill, tells a simple tale which on its own is only somewhat appealing to the reader or the child being read to. In this case, Lemieux relates the story of a bear who wakes to "a funny little noise" one spring. After much searching and questioning, he finally discovers, just as he is about to fall asleep for the winter, that the sound is his own heart beating. Lemieux makes her own illustrations for this story, illustrations that enhance every word of the book. Her drawings are rich in colour; she has complete control of tone, shading, and light. There is a softness to her drawings that adds a magical dreaminess to the story. The bear is "Walt Disneyish"; realistic yet so obviously a caricature of a bear. The natural world is shown in all the seasons of the year, in various kinds of weather, at different times of the day and night (fig. 3). Lemieux's drawings not only illustrate the story, they reinforce the central idea of discovery in a myriad of ways.

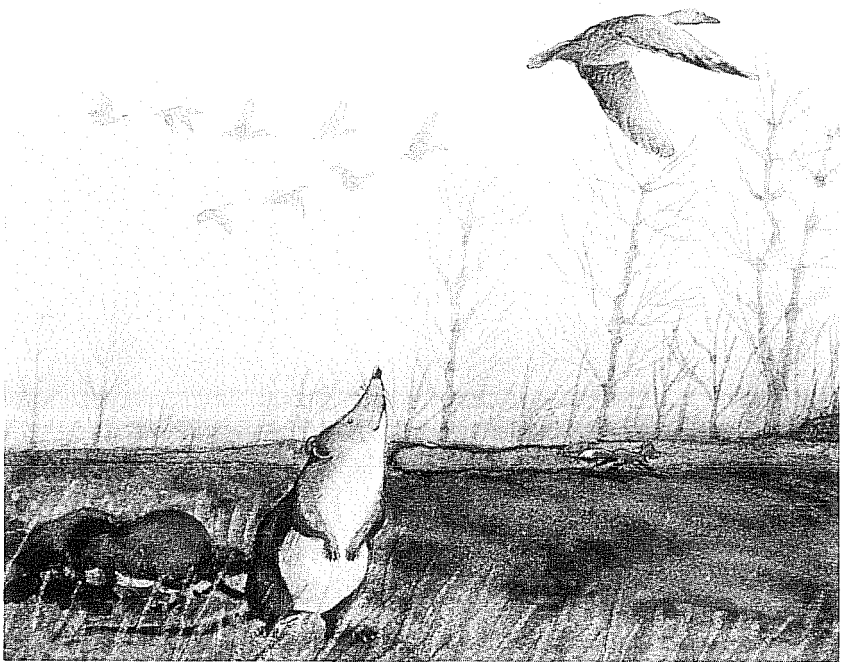


Fig. 3

The strengths and weaknesses of these six books are directly connected to the relationship between text and illustration. Certainly, if there is a problem with the text, itself, as in the case of *The leopard and the lily*, the book is difficult to redeem. However, if the text merits consideration but the illustrations are inadequate as in the case of *There's an alligator under my bed* and, to some extent, *Orff, 27 dragons (and a snorkell)*, the book fails to attain critical appreciation. Only when illustration and text work together — stylistically, thematically, and creatively — as in the case of *Snowfeather, What is that noise?*, and, most obviously, in *Tootlie*, does the children's picture book become an object for literary and artistic appreciation. Based on the number of books from this short sampling that deserve such appreciation and in view of the individual merits of the other books discussed it seems that Canadian children's literature continues to reflect the talents of Canadian writers and illustrators and the good judgment of the Canadian publishing industry.

Sandra A. McCormick has a doctorate in English literature from the University of Alberta. Currently teaching at Wilfrid Laurier University, she lives in Guelph with her husband and two young daughters.