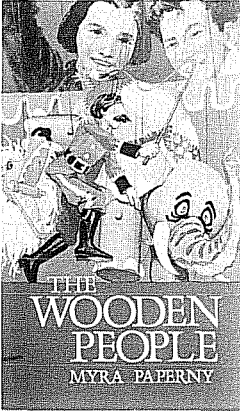


MYRA PAPERNY'S NOVELS OF FAMILY AND BELONGING



The wooden people, Myra Paperny. 1976, reprinted Overlea House, 1987. 192 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7172-2272-1. **Take a giant step**, Myra Paperny. Overlea House, 1987. 208 pp. \$13.95, \$3.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-7172-2157-1, 0-7172-2158-X.

One pleasure of reading a good novel is finding out about things you didn't know. . . living another, completely unfamiliar life for awhile and really feeling as though you've been there. Books like this can broaden experience and, when they are really well written, never expose their didactic underpinnings.

Myra Paperny's *The wooden people* and *Take a giant step* deal with unusual children: misfits, culturally and socially. The Stein children in *The wooden people* never have a chance to put down roots. Their father, a Russian immigrant, has never forgotten "the filthy village" of his homeland, "with all us Jews jammed together into a small area. . . I swore that when my chance came," he says, "I'd keep moving until I'd seen the entire world. No one'd ever tell me I had to live on one wretched patch of land for the rest of my life". A merchant, he makes his living buying stores, building them up, and moving on to something larger in another town. As a result his children are unable to form lasting friendships; they feel adrift, always "the new kids", always "different". They are also misfits in the behaviour and dress imposed on them by their father's strict, old-world ways. They must work in the store when other children are out playing. And, Jews, they celebrate holidays at times of the year which seem "funny" to their largely Christian neighbours in Southern B.C. and Alberta. The novel depicts their lives from the inside: we see the world as they do, and learn about the slow, delicate process of assimilation, as bit by bit the children — like children of so many immigrant families — forge the links which make them finally whole members of their new homeland.

Take a giant step opens to the reader the world of a family dedicated to classical music. Bernard "Buzz" Bush is a young violin prodigy; he represents for his immigrant parents the gift of talent the family has awaited for generations. It's probably fair to say that many Canadian families are familiar with the day-to-day life of Little League Baseball families, or

hockey families, or any one of a number of common cultural/sports activities. But we are not, as a group of readers, so familiar with what life is like in a musical family such as the Bushes'. Here again, Paperny excels in

TAKE A GIANT STEP

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getting us inside their home and their ways. They sit down to a spontaneous concert as readily as other families might challenge one another to a computer game or a Scrabble match. The Bush family makes room in their lives for music because they cannot imagine life without it. What this means for young Buzz is that he must find some way of linking this family world with the outside world of his peer group (and beyond!). The story is told through his eyes, and we see how very different he knows he is when he hears a newcomer to the neighbourhood jibe, "People! They're fruitcakes. A kid who walks around in a cape all day and fiddles? He doesn't even fight properly."

Buzz wears the cape when things get too hard, when the two worlds pull against one another too much for him to bear. The cape, he likes to think, makes him invisible and when he is not visible of course he doesn't stand out. And the cape allows him to do anything he wants to do; it gives him power to play baseball and ride bikes and enjoy other forbidden pleasures which put his precious violinist's fingers at risk. He knows the cape is a fantasy of escape, but it helps him through the harder moments, until he finally manages to bring the two parts of his life together.

Both stories are built around strong, loving family units. These are not accounts of children dealing with obtuse or indifferent (or absent) parents. The Stein children have to risk the fury of their patriarchal father in order to blend themselves with the community of their school chums. When the children, driven by loneliness, secretly create a marvelous puppet theatre and a company of handmade marionettes, they and their father meet head-on in a conflict which pits his stern idealism against their need for roots and community. The book begins with a strong family setting, and it ends with an even stronger one. At the outset, they are strong in isolation, but by the end, the family is strong in community with their neighbours.

The Bush family in *Take a giant step* establishes another kind of "difference" for Buzz. His parents teach music. Lots of dads and brothers and uncles have left to join the armed forces of World War II, and it seems funny for Buzz's father to be home. But in this story, too, the family unit is the strongest force for change and adaptation. Buzz's favourite uncle is killed in the war, and his mother has to travel east for a long time to nurse

her mother. Buzz's father, distraught with these crises, extends practice sessions, and Buzz sees himself trapped in a bubble where there is no life but practice. Buzz runs away. He makes some vital discoveries about himself and his music: he finds that people like him, and that he likes them. And he also finds that he perceives the world around him as music: the majestic Spiral Tunnel is, for him, a symphonic composition of the sounds of rails and wheels and echoes.

Myra Paperny became an award-winning writer with the publication of *The wooden people* in 1976. She also scooped up not only the Canada Council Award for Juvenile Literature, but also the Little, Brown Children's Book Award. She has earned an Alberta Award for Achievement in Literature, and *Take a giant step* has been chosen by the Canadian Children's Book Centre for inclusion in their "Our Choice" collection. Paperny seems to have almost total recall for the world as seen through the eyes of a child, and a near-perfect way with children's speech patterns. These two books are jam-packed with little, local details which make the families and their settings seem familiar. The pacing of both stories is quick; once the family situation is established, the plot unravels with a flamboyant series of crises and events not seen much since Saturday serials at the local cinema. Both books are suitable for Grade 5-6 level readers, and beyond the sheer appeal of the action, the humour and realism of the stories will have young readers looking around for the next Paperny book.

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FRIENDS FROM FAMISH GUT



Fanny for change, Jean Hayes Feather. Breakwater, 1987. 79 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920911-31-5.

Fanny for change is a wise and puckish book. Fanny Grace is eleven. She lives in Famish Gut, Newfoundland. She is a spirited little girl, built like a tree stump. She brings a quick mind and a courageous will to the serious business of coping with childhood humiliations, and in the process, she develops commonsense and insight.

This is a well-written story. It opens with Fanny's sensibility as she groans inwardly at the annual "What