

Farmer Joe Goes To The City



Each of these books allowed the children to become actively involved and to use their imaginations. The stories held the interest of the audience from beginning to end and provided satisfying and enjoyable experiences which the children begged to have repeated. What better review could any book get?

Judy Willson works as a primary resource teacher in Mississauga and has a special interest in children's literature.

TEXTBOUND ON A ROCKY SHORE

Wind in my pocket. Ellen Bryan Obed, Illus. Shawn Steffler. Breakwater Books, 1990. 32 pp., \$14.95 casebound. ISBN 0-920911-74-9. **Play time.** Roger Paré, English adaptation David Homel. Annick Press, 1990, 24 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-087-1. **Hickory dickory duck.** Pat Patterson, Illus. Joe Weissmann. Greey de Pencier Books, 1990. 32 pp., \$12.95. ISBN 0-919872-72-7. **The dressed up book.** Kathy Stinson, Illus. Heather Collins. Annick Press, 1990, 32 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-103-7. **A silly codfish tale/Un conte en l'air d'une morue amusante.** Pat Whelan and Arlene Luke, Illus. Ronan Kennedy. Jespersen Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 9-921692-14-5. **Old Mrs. Schmatterbung and other friends.** Charles Wilkins, Illus. Victor GAD. McClelland and Stewart, 1989, 32 pp., \$9.95. ISBN 0-7710-8839-6.

Agnia Barto, a Russian poet well known in her country for her children's poetry, addressing the Fourth Symposium of the International Research Society for Children's Literature at Exeter University in England, called for illustration which would allow the child to "act," that is, come to an understanding of his own. Barto described the very different responses of primary age children to a book of her poems in editions done by two different illustrators. One poem, "The toys," contains the line, "Teddy lost his paw." One illustrator showed a teddy bear with a bandage on his arm. This elicited the remark, "The teddy bear's paw doesn't hurt, it's been pasted on and bandaged, and the teddy bear's now going to have a cup of tea." A later version showed the broken-off paw, to which one child remarked, "My little Bunny has no hair on its head, just like my Grandpa, but I'll never leave him" ("Children's responses to il-

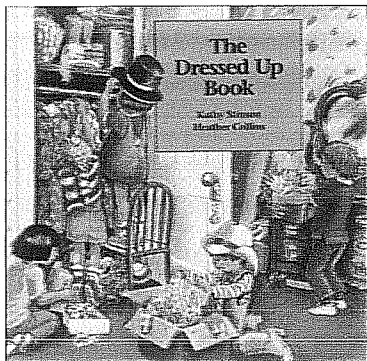
illustrations of poetry." *Children's Literature in Education*, [Vol. 10, No. 1, 1979] 11-17). The large responsibility an illustrator bears is well supported by Barto's comments.

The illustrator of poetry has a special responsibility, different from, perhaps greater than, that of the illustrator of prose. The illustrator's art may set up an interference, or channel the reader's responses in a different direction.

A single narrative poem treated in a standard thirty-two page picturebook format is, of course, not the same thing as a collection of poems each illustrated more or less independently of the others. There are poems which cannot exist apart from their accompanying visuals, and there are poems virtually emasculated by heavy-handed illustration. When the text is not poetry, but is at best only verse, or at worst, doggerel, what is the illustrator to do? A too restrained approach in such a case might only go down with the bad verse. Oddly enough, sometimes a mediocre verse text seems to call out for some fairly elaborate illustration. Together, the two may emerge as a minor work of art. One form will assimilate the other. Assimilation (which I discussed in *CCL*, 52, 1988, 56-60), will occur in any case, whether or not both forms are individually fine, and a work of art can result in either case.

Six recent Canadian books, all written in verse, all profusely illustrated, pose problems for the critic. If they are fine books are they fine because they contain wonderful poetry? Because the visuals are arresting? Because the two work so well together? What can one say of a visually beautiful object the text of which is trite or dull? Does one even notice sensitive and evocative poetry in the presence of too much, even garish, illustration?

Hickory dickory duck is a collection of twelve well-known nursery rhymes. Each is extended with additional verses, metrically adequate though not memorable. The last verse of each provides a puzzle which relates to the double-page illustration provided. Thus readers set about finding the dozen tarts hidden by the Knave of Hearts. Weissmann's well-drawn illustrations reveal not too easily the objects of the search. The book is well designed, and on the final endpaper are clues to help any reader who needs them.



Another puzzle book is Stinson's *The dressed up book*. Again the verses (scarcely verses at all) are treated each to a separate double-page spread. The theme of dressing up is illustrated beautifully in bright pastels by Heather Collins. Each verse asks four or five questions about costumes leading children to search the pictures. The clues are funny, and the idea works well. "Who likes to kiss a full moon mouth?" relates to a vampire costume worn by one of the

children. When verses are no more than clever questions, illustrations can afford to be lavish. These are.

In *A silly codfish tale/Un conte en l'air d'une morue amusante* by Pat Whelan (French by Arlene Luke), illustrated in ink drawings by Ronan Kennedy, the poem is printed a few lines at a time in English and in French, on the left-hand pages. Illustrations, framed, occupy each right-hand page. The poem narrates in first person the story of a codfish. The story does not compel a reader's interest; the verse style does not compensate in any way for the lack of narrative interest, and the illustrations, which are at times inviting, become soon too much of a muchness. One has to wish that such a great Canadian as the codfish could have a better book.

Old Mrs. Schmatterbung and other friends by Charles Wilkins, illustrated by Victor GAD, is one of those books a reviewer would like to hate. The first impression is of an ugly book. The illustrations, done in a bluish-black monotone, are ugly. They smear and blear, smudge and crawl over three-quarters of the right-hand page of each double-page spread, and they are grotesque. But they are clever, and by the third reading this reviewer developed a perverse liking for the ugly things. The poems, which struggle to hang onto the remaining quarter page, are very funny nonsense verses written by a proficient rhymers who knows how metrics tick. They would be trampled by the visuals if they were one long poem, but individually they survive and even, amazingly, hold their own.

Wind in my pocket has the poet's touch. Single poems are here unified by the cycle of the seasons, and by a strong sense of place. The latter is beautifully buttressed by the maritime scenes provided by the illustrator. Shawn Steffler's simple, bold illustrations provide an obligato to the evocative lyrics of Ellen Bryan Obed.

A particular problem with some books results from translation. Aesthetic and linguistic considerations leave the critic in a quandary especially when the text is a poetic one. Roger Paré with Bertrand Gauthier, has written and illustrated *Play time*, but the English adaptation is by David Homel. Only a comparativist could comment on the relative qualities of the two texts, but it is valid, if academic, to wonder whether one text or the other best fits Paré's illustrations. In any case Paré is a painterly illustrator. Each right-hand page is a painting, and a very elegant one, too. Even when he composes two smooching plump bears on a park bench in the moonlight, considerations of colour, and chiaroscuro are evident. Each verse is boldly printed on the left in black on white. The simplicity of the verses neatly understates the classy paintings. "A moonlit kiss/on a furry cheek,/while the hoot-owls call/ and the field mice squeak" seems to be all that needs saying.

Kenneth Marantz has been arguing for years the necessity of perceiving and valuing picture books as a form of visual, not literary art, and he offers lessons we all should learn. In a recent valuable bibliography (*The art of child-*

ren's picture books: A selective reference guide, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988) compiled with Sylvia Marantz, he comments, "In remaining text-bound we fail to exploit sufficiently the visual qualities of books that...cause us delight". When we deal with a poetic text that could stand proudly on its own without accompanying illustrations, we find it difficult to avoid feeling textbound. We agree with Barto that in helping the child to respond the illustrator carries a heavy responsibility. And so we struggle along the rocky shore in the effort to deal not just with text, not just with visuals, but with something new that calls both together.

Allan Sheldon teaches *Children's Literature and English at Medicine Hat College, Alberta.*

OVERT AND COVERT CONTENT IN CURRENT ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Louis and the night sky. Nicola Morgan. Illus. author. Oxford University Press, 1990. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540746-6; **Jeremiah and Mrs. Ming.** Sharon Jennings. Illus. Mireille Levert. Annick Press, 1990. 24 pp., \$14.95 \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-079-0, 1-55037-078-2; **Ellie and the ivy.** Allen Morgan. Illus. Steven Beinicke. Oxford University Press, 1989. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540726-1; **Zoe and the mysterious X.** Richard Thompson. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick Press, 1989. 24 pp., cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-081-2, 1-550 37-080-4; **Effie's bath** Richard Thompson. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Annick Press, 1989. 30 pp., \$14.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-055-3, 1-55037-052-9; **Alice and the birthday giant.** John. F. Green. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1989. 40 pp., \$14.95. cloth. ISBN 0-590-73139-4; **Now, now Markus or I need a bird.** Martin Aver. Illus. Simone Klages. Annick Press, 1990. Unpag., \$8.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-092-8.

Research on illustrated children's literature is frequently dismissed in academic circles with derisive smiles and restrained nods. "Kiddies' lit" usually occupies the bottom rung of the literary ladder; research on illustrations in children's books is not part of the ladder of art history which supports academics who interpret drawings by Goya, Blake or Beardsly within the social context of the artist's era. Certainly, illustrated children's literature currently on the Canadian market reflects the social and cultural concerns of our time. The books under review give evidence that obverse and subverse socio-political issues are woven within the text *and* the images of these seemingly so innocent and decorative books. I hope that this cross-section of current publications will provide skeptics with food for thought. In fact, serious research concerning the