

As well as helping children understand the consequences of lying and the importance of empathizing with their pets, the writers of these stories make some gentle points to their adult readers. Bourgeois gives us dialogue between Franklin and his parents in which Franklin is not blamed or punished for normal childhood fibbing, and the likelihood that he will repeat this mistake is accepted good-naturedly. Hutchinson's message is more subtle, because it is one that our society tends to reject when made directly. Mr. Sweetums' feelings about such "feminine" qualities as pinkness and frilliness, exemplifies a dominant one of our world. He perceives them as "yucky," and as a threat to his dignity and tomcat-hood. His attitude is precisely that of people who recoil in horror at the idea of dressing a baby boy in pink. This amusing tale attempts to reach across the gender line to show that a tomcat doesn't have to howl on a backyard fence, or be named "Spike," to be a real male. He may even dance in the moonlight.

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SNIPS AND SNAILS. . .

Patrick and the backhoe. Howard White. Illus. Bus Griffiths. Nightwood Editions, 1991. 23 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88971-052-X. **Brendon and the wolves.** Allen Morgan. Illus. Christina Farmilo. Oasis Press, 1991. 32 pp., \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-895092-01-9. **The magic hockey skates.** Allen Morgan. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Oxford University Press, 1991. 32 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540823-3. **Christopher's dream car.** Andreas Greve. Annick Press, 1991. Unpag., \$15.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-1169-X. **Stephen's frog.** Barbara Feldman. Annick Press, 1991. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-200-9.

It seems what's on the minds of little boys doesn't change all that much; the protagonists of these five picture books are cases in point. Their interests lie with machines, animals and nature, sports, and, best of all, the way all of these things fit into the realm of the imaginary. Some of these five books, however, are much more successful than others at creating a world that children will want to enter again and again.

Howard White's *Patrick and the backhoe* is one of the least successful at doing just that – describing an imaginary place and situation that a child can believe in and come to love. Inconsistencies run rampant, and even an adult must re-read several passages before making sense of them. The story of Patrick, his grandfather, the grandfather's backhoe, and their rescue of a B.C. town from a flood just doesn't feel right.

The first sentence in the book sets up a conflict with Patrick's brother Simon, which turns out to be completely irrelevant. Another confusing sequence tells how Patrick's parents are "always busy talking to people in the bookstore," despite never telling us they do so because they own it.

There are far too many instances where a child would be thrown off by the contradictions in this book; Patrick flushes his beloved stuffed toy down the toilet for no apparent reason, then grabs it out of a sewer pipe and hugs it, muck and all, a few pages later. Better editing would have caught these weaknesses, and reduced the unnecessary repetition used to establish Patrick's love of machines.

Bus Griffiths's illustrations do little to clear up the confusion; Patrick and the other characters tend to change their appearance from the paintings to the sketches. Despite an occasional striking sketch or painting, the illustrations (particularly the paintings) are too reminiscent of the art class renderings of an adolescent who's never quite mastered drawing people.

The world of Brendon in Allen Morgan's *Brendon and the wolves* is similarly confusing and unlikely to hold a young reader's interest. Morgan heavily-handedly attempts to deal with the fear of change that every child feels. Brendon worries about the future, but we have no idea what brings on his sudden concern. More than once Brendon wonders why he is doing something; so does the reader.

Under a "changeling moon" one night, Brendon becomes a wolf, and spends a year learning from the pack leader, who dispenses such embarrassing approximations of wise and mystical sayings as "Thoughts are like leaves. Keep yourself still and eventually they will drift to the ground." Brendon is also told not to be afraid to change: "Whatever is now will surely end, whatever will be is already." Try explaining that one to a six-year-old.

In attempting to be mystical and insightful, Morgan simply ends up being confusing and dull. Christina Farmilo's illustrations show little imagination, using a muted palette which adds nothing to the story's momentum. Neither dramatic nor terribly well executed, the illustrations are unlikely to interest the intended audience.

Much more successful is Morgan's other book, *The magic hockey skates*, a cleanly told story with interesting characters and that irresistible plot device, the three wishes. Joey's disappointment turns to elation when the kind salesman tells him his second-hand hockey skates are actually "magic." He wows the bigger kids with his skating skill playing shinny, and filling in as goalie when his brother is injured in a league game. The skates perform their real magic by boosting his confidence, but young readers will enjoy pondering whether they are magical or not.

The book's airy layout and Michael Martchenko's familiar stylized, action-packed illustrations perfectly complement the fanciful storyline.

Christopher's dream car is another imaginary adventure, but despite a

strong premise and dreamy illustrations, it does not live up to its potential. Christopher's journey takes him to the local fair, where he meets a boy who helps him sell candied tomatoes. The pair go on to a vaguely Spanish seaside town where they repair a fisherman's boat and enjoy the sights. Christopher, of course, returns in time for supper with his grandparents.

In covering so much ground, author and illustrator Andreas Greve lessens the impact of Christopher's adventure; it becomes a series of unconnected bits, any of which would have made an interesting story on its own. The events don't have to be realistic, but they should make some kind of sense.

Given Greve's control of words and pictures, there are too many inconsistencies in the book. The text first uses the term "dream car" as adults would, to denote an expensive sports or luxury car, then switches immediately to use it the way a child – indeed, Christopher would: a vehicle that can go anywhere in a twinkling of an eye. And if all the text refers to Christopher's dream *car*, why do the pictures show him in a *van*? Literal-minded young readers may well be annoyed.

Finally comes *Stephen's frog*, a wonderful book for very young children. Using all kinds of fabrics and sewing techniques, Barbara Feldman creates fascinating, complex pictures of Stephen and his pet frog. The pictures build a story without the help – or need – of words, so it can be told differently every time.

Despite the potential limitations of her chosen medium, Feldman creates refreshingly different scenarios, whether it is Stephen and his frog looking down from an airplane en route to his grandparents' farm, the frog's misbehaviour at the dinner table, or its eventual return to a lively pond by its loving owner. The pictures yield new delightful details with every perusal – quizzical cattle, an embroidered snail – giving it a richness and potential for longevity unrivalled by any of the others.

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WITCHES WITHOUT BROOMSTICKS AND BEDS THAT GO "CREAK" IN THE NIGHT

Aunt Fred is a witch. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Chum McLeod. Second Story Press, 1991. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-23-6; **Who is sleeping in Aunty's bed?** Kathy Stinson. Illus. Robin Baird Lewis. Oxford University Press, 1991. 32 pp, \$14.95 laminated boards. ISBN 0-19-540824-1, 0-19-540852-7.

While the visits and the aunts are quite different, in a sense these two books complement each other. *Aunt Fred is a witch* is about an unusual and exciting