

Alphonse Piché, Bernard Pozier, Yves Préfontaine, André Roy, Élise Turcotte, Yolande Villemaire) qui rassemblent une variété de sujets: "amour de l'autre, de la nature et de l'univers, violence, solitude, mort, maladie, peur, abandon, monde en péril, plaisir de vivre, inscription d'une intimité dans un monde urbain anonyme, intégration dans une réalité d'ici, informatique, rock..." (*ibid.*). Comme d'habitude avec les anthologies, il y a des poèmes qui me parlent, d'autres qui ne me disent rien. Mais j'ai déjà passé la quarantaine et il m'arrive rarement ces jours-ci de voir ma vie illuminée par les lasers de la poésie. Une anthologie pour ceux d'un certain âge? Quelle audace! Quel défi!

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LOSING THE LIFT: LEE'S NEW POEMS

The ice cream store. Dennis Lee. Illus. David McPhail. HarperCollins, 1991. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. 0-00-223749-0.

It is all too easy to write rhymes that are suitably brainless and absurd, but that somehow never go anywhere. They *should* be just as playful as the good ones, but...you have to concede that they're not. Somehow they don't get off the ground; you don't like coming back to them, and when you do they just don't give you the visceral lift that is the only mark of success with rhymes of this sort. But there is seldom any obvious reason why this should be so. (Lee, "Roots and play" 49)

So wrote Dennis Lee in 1976. Regrettably, Lee's words apply only too well to his latest collection, *The ice cream store*, whose poems neither "get off the ground" nor give the reader a "visceral lift." And indeed, the reasons for this are far from obvious.

It is generally conceded that Lee has yet to duplicate the stunning achievement of his twin debut books – *Alligator pie*, for younger children, *Nicholas knock* for older. Yet just how objective are such critical judgments? If Lee had burst onto the very receptive Canadian scene in 1974 with *Ice cream store*, would I be comparing *Alligator pie* unfavorably with it today?

Ice cream store shares many of *Alligator pie*'s qualities: the colloquial child voice, the euphony, the thoroughly modern nonsense, the lyricism. Missing, however, are the natural flow of line and dazzling virtuosity of the poet's earlier work.

Although Lee's poems undergo extensive revision (see *CCL* interview with Lee, vol. 33, page 8), the results, in his best work, appear effortless. In *Ice cream store*, however, poetic effects are strained. Compare, for example, the rightness of even imperfect rhymes, like "twelve" and "themselves" in "The animals" (*Garbage delight*), with the forced rhymes of "The perfect pets":

Now, Bigfoot's kind of squishable,
The softy of them all;
McGonigle is silly
Cause he likes to climb the wall;
And Hannah's pretty big I guess,
She's maybe six or twelve,
And all of them have shadows that go
Marching by themselves. ("The animals")

SO - I got a FOX,
And her name was Knox,
And I don't know why
But she liked to box; ("The perfect pets")

Lee can still cast the Learian spell he achieved in "The poodle and the Grundiboob" (*Nicholas Knock*). But the magic promised by the lines, "And softly in Saskatoon/A child hears the magical tune," in "The mouse that lived on the moon," (*Ice cream store*) is dispelled by the euphonic overkill:

The mouse on the moon
With a silvery BOOOM,
With mooing bassoon
With a mystical tune,
And a child who can croon
To the faraway moon
In a musical, mousical,
Moo-sical, mouthical,
Mythical, mystical tune -
A tune with a moo and a spoon,
The tune of the mouse on the moon!

In his meditative poems, Lee often gets at abstract ideas through a child's very concrete musings:

I'm thinking in bed
Cause I can't get out
Till I learn how to think
What I'm thinking about;
What I'm thinking about
Is a person to be -
A sort of a person
Who feels like me.

I might still be Alice,
Excepting I'm not.
And Snoopy is super,
But not when it's hot;...
("Thinking in Bed," *Alligator pie*)

The child's voice in *Ice cream store's* "The secret place" is less authentic – to borrow Lee's own characterization of condescending children's verse, "something pasted onto the child's inner life from the outside" ("Roots and play" 30).

It's hard to explain the way it feels,
Or even where I go.
It isn't a place in time or space,
But once I'm there, I *know*.

Lee has always eschewed what he calls "the bombast or...cheap didacticism I found in other kids' poems and was afraid of in myself" ("Roots and play" 33). Surprisingly, this has surfaced in *Ice cream store*, in the title poem's banal paean to multiculturalism –

Oh, the kids around the block are like an
Ice cream store,
'Cause there's chocolate, and vanilla,
And there's maple and there's more,

– and in "WILD!", the inevitable ecology poem ("Before the earth is through, / We have to make it green again –").

To say that Lee has lost his touch would be unfair. "Down in Patagonia" plays brilliantly with sound:

Down in Patagonia
A walrus caught pneumonia,
From playing its trombonia
While swimming all alonia.

And several lyric poems, like "Cool pillow," are superbly crafted:

Pillow, cool pillow,
Come snuggle with me,
Drift me to sleep
Where I'm longing to be;

Birds in the nest
And the nest in the tree –
So pillow, cool pillow,
Come snuggle with me.

Still, the overall impression is of duplication rather than innovation – of reworking old ideas. Compare for example, the bouncy "Dinosaur dinner" from *Jelly belly* with its derivative successor, "Dinosaur dishes":

Allosaurus, stegosaurus,
Brontosaurus too,
All went off for dinner at the
Dinosaur zoo; ("Dinosaur dinner")

Oh, the mumosaurus washed,
And the dadosaurus dried,
And the kidosaurus took them
In a wagon for a ride. ("Dinosaur dishes")

American David McPhail's watercolours, with their rich colour gradations and animal and child faces reminiscent, in their expressiveness, of many of Sendak's characters, elaborate wittily upon the often limited text. My favourite is the enormous, berobed and sandaled pig blissfully floating mid-air, an amusing gloss on one of the collection's most musical lyrics:

Lucy go lightly
Wherever you go,
Light as a lark
From your head to your toe;

In slippers you float
And in sandals you flow -
So Lucy, go lightly
Wherever you go. ("Lucy go lightly")

No, Lee hasn't lost his ear, but too few of the poems in this collection display his gifts.

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