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PICTURE BOOKS PACKED WITH HUMOUR AND ACTION

Too many chickens. Paulette Bourgeois. Illus. Bill Slavin. Kids Can Press, 1990. Unpag., \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 0-921103-95-6; **Travels for two: Stories and lies from my childhood.** Stéphane Poulin. Trans. David Homel. Annick Press, 1991. Unpag., \$15.95, \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-20-5-X, 1-55037-204-1; **The travelling musicians.** P.K. Page. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Kids Can Press, 1991. Unpag., \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-039-3.

When it comes to action-packed plots and sheer entertainment, three picture books, suitable for ages three to seven, stand out for their excellence and diversity of style.

Too many chickens, by Paulette Bourgeois (author of the *Franklin* series), captures the chaos and havoc of Mrs. Kerr's classroom, which ensues when a farmer gives eggs to the teacher, but forgets to return to school to pick up the newly-hatched chicks. Unforeseen challenges test the limits of imagination and endurance for both teacher and students. More antics follow when the farmer finally does come back to the classroom and comments on how wonderfully the class has cared for the chicks. Not only does she leave the chicks in Mrs. Kerr's capable hands, but also she rewards the class with a gift: a rabbit. Rabbits soon multiply, chicks grow, a goat appears on the scene and the classroom becomes a regular barnyard of confusion, but sales from eggs, knitted angora hats and sweaters, and goat's milk make it possible for Mrs. Kerr to buy a farm. Everything eventually returns to normal at school, at least until Mrs. Kerr decides to grow some rather ominous seeds, the growth of which young readers can easily determine from hints supplied by the illustrations.

The repetition of phrases, accumulative events coupled with colourful diction and select verbal usage, complement the quick pace of the story and its humour. Ample dialogue, and a reliance on the senses of smell and sound besides sight, bring alive the hilarity of the barnyard brought into the most unlikely of places.

The double-page spreads by Bill Slavin are childlike, textured and amusing. The use of pastels gives a sense of immediacy and warmth, a medium with which children are familiar, and can appreciate.

Travels for two: Stories and lies from my childhood is part of an unusual series

about a mother and her many children. Award-winning author-illustrator Stéphane Poulin creates a playful atmosphere of chaos and havoc when the mother wins a trip for two to the tropics. Like *Too many chickens*, the text begins with a character who receives a surprise, and once again, the characters' endurance is tested.

Told in the first person by one of the children, it is related that mother can't just take one child, so the rest are packed into a trunk, including the dog, and taken aboard the cruise ship. En route to the tropics, the children leap out of the trunk in urgent need of the washroom, and scatter in every direction. When an irate pilot discovers them, they are all ordered off the ship. A high adventure ensues as the family sails the seas in their trunk complete with mast, lands on a deserted paradisaical island, are captured by pirates, and rescued by what looks like the same cruise ship. The swiftly-paced plot is zany and unpredictable. Whether the story is read in French, or in its English translation by David Homel, the short sentences with their matter-of-factness concerning fantastical events add charming and understated humour. The first-person narrative, told from the child's perspective, lends a tone of immediacy. Unlike the warmth and whimsy of Slavin's illustrations, Poulin's vivid double-page spreads with their surreal disquiet, nevertheless produce a most memorable and engaging effect upon readers.

Although *The travelling musicians* is an adaptation of the Grimm's classic folktale *The musicians of Bremen*, P.K. Page's version is to be lauded for its originality of expression and its ability to engage youngsters so thoroughly.

P.K. Page was originally asked to write this adaptation for the Victoria Symphony in 1983. Years later, she realized that it could stand up on its own as a children's book. Page weaves her poetical voice into the fabric of the tale. Opening with sunshine in summer, singing birds, and fragrant wildflowers, the story has a tone which is deceptively quieter than the roving romps of *Travels for two*, or the frenetic humour of *Too many chickens*. *The travelling musicians*, however, culminates into a rip-roaring plot of robber-chasing and sing-songing which will delight children. Besides a plot-oriented story, the distinct personalities of each character combine to form an unforgettable troupe of musicians. The creatures are no longer of use to their masters, but when the animals team up and dream of making their fortune in the city with their music, they soon find happiness and a sense of well-being again.

Page's retelling is particularly fitting for preschoolers with its lively, sprightly dialogue, rhythm, carefully-selected diction, repetitive structure, and musical sound effects in which children can participate wholeheartedly. Like *Too many chickens* and *Travels for two*, it is delightful for reading aloud in groups or one-on-one.

The illustrations by Kady MacDonald Denton, who won the Mr. Christie Award for *The story of Little Quack*, are vital and charming. Denton captures the sparkling, joyful personalities and scenes in airy, yet colourful and energetic pen

and ink watercolour drawings. Her pictures deservedly received an Honorable mention from the Elizabeth Mzarik-Cleaver Award committee.

The three picture books tell very different stories, each in a style uniquely their own.

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UN RAPACE A DISNEYLAND

Le Harfang des neiges. Joseph Lévesque. Illus. Pierre Jarry. Waterloo, Qué., Michel Quintin, 1991. 24 pp., 12,95\$ relié. ISBN 2-920438-37-9.

En onze courts commentaires rimés, Joseph Lévesque nous apprend l'essentiel de ce qu'il faut savoir sur le harfang des neiges: ses moeurs alimentaires, son mode de vie, son utilité dans l'économie de la nature. Le texte est simple, convient bien au très jeune public auquel il s'adresse et lui communique efficacement les notions de base sur cet oiseau rapace. Dommage qu'une petite entorse syntaxique se soit glissée à la page 8, où il faudrait lire "le harfang (...) préfère chasser le jour *plutôt que* la nuit".

Dans cet album documentaire pour les petits, les illustrations de Pierre Jarry occupent l'essentiel de l'espace et elles ne sauraient passer inaperçues. Avec beaucoup d'adresse et d'imagination, l'artiste a su transposer en images les données du texte, ce qui n'était pas toujours facile. Par exemple, comment traduire visuellement le fait que le harfang des neiges "capture parfois jusqu'à trois cents souris par mois"? Pierre Jarry se tire très élégamment d'affaire tout en suivant le texte de très près. Par ailleurs, l'astuce des mises en scène crée des tableaux amusants qui divertissent le jeune lecteur. Nul doute que l'illustration a été considérée ici comme un enrobage alléchant destiné à faire passer la partie plus substantielle du livre et dépourvu de visées autres que de bonnes retombées commerciales.

Cependant, malgré l'invention dont elles témoignent, les illustrations aux couleurs très vives et très "accrocheuses" manquent totalement de subtilité dans leur exécution. Peut-on imaginer un vert plus terriblement vert que celui des pages 4 et 5, un rose plus tape-à-l'oeil que celui des pages 18 et 19, des associations de couleurs plus rébarbatives que celles qui nous sont infligées aux pages 22 et 23? L'intensification des couleurs est un moyen facile, quoique un peu vulgaire, pour attirer l'attention d'un jeune public déjà trop aisément séduit par tout ce qui brille.

D'autres excès affectent le style des illustrations: les animaux, déjà très anthropomorphisés, sont aussi caricaturés. Leurs caractéristiques, les expressions qui leur sont prêtées sont grossies, amplifiées, presque jusqu'à les