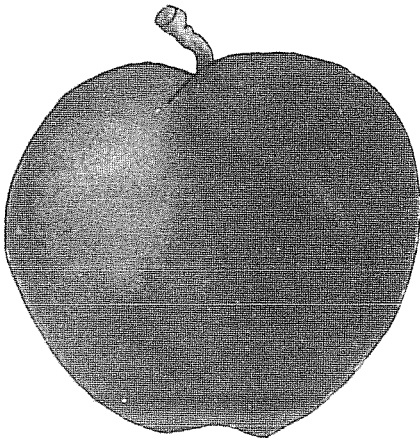


Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

WHEN TOYS LOSE THEIR CHARMS, TRY EPISTEMOLOGY

Starry Night. Vincent Van Gogh. ISBN 1-895209-04-8; **Symphony No. 9.** Ludwig van Beethoven. ISBN 1-895209-020-1; **The Origin of Species.** Charles Darwin. ISBN 895209-00-05; **All the World's a Stage.** William Shakespeare. ISBN 1-895209-06-4. All books: adapted by Harry Karlinsky. Illus. Brock Irwin. Davis Press, 1991. 12 pp., \$7.95 board binding. **My Food.** ISBN 2-921198-27-4; **My Toys.** ISBN 2-921198-26-6; **My House.** ISBN 2-921198-24-X; **My Clothes.** ISBN 2-921198-25-8. Illus. H el ene Desputeaux.  ditions Chouette, 1991. 26 pp., board binding. **Brothers.** ISBN 1-55037-274-2; **Sisters.** ISBN 1-55037-275-0. Text by Debbie Bailey. Photographs by Susan Huszar. Annick Press, 1993. 16 pp., board binding.



apple

the rhythm and texture of Western culture. The assumption here is not, of course, that such a child will have settled views on Shakespeare's stagecraft or a fine appreciation of Van Gogh's natural mysticism. It is not empirical knowledge that is taken for granted, but cultural attentiveness. The authors are confident, in other words, that a basic vocabulary exists in early childhood with which to

At the risk of sounding grandiose—or worse, simply incapacitated for ordinary existence by long exposure to the pretensions of the academy—

I have to admit to being somewhat carried away by the philosophical questions raised by these books for very young children. The books fall into three categories, each of which represents a different set of assumptions about the cognitive tasks to be accomplished at the beginning of life. The series of “children's condensed classics” published by Davis Press recognizes the two- to five-year-old child as already initiated into

make the world pictures of Shakespeare and Van Gogh (and Darwin and Beethoven) congruent with the child's own.

In contrast to this historical and contextual understanding of early intellectual development is the much more austere, even clinical vision of the Sandseed Collection published by Éditions Chouette. In the drawings of Hélène Desputeaux, we find the world of material objects rendered in powerful and elegant simplicity. Each apple, banana, and loaf of bread; every hat, coat, and pair of boots; the house and all that it contains—every conceivable object with which a child might be familiar is depicted alone, unadorned, in the centre of a white page. The drawings—for the most part in primary colours—are beautiful, but severe: with the aid of drawings like these, one feels, the Platonic forms themselves (of hairbrush or tube of toothpaste) might at last be apprehended. Pure perception, from this point of view, is not only possible, but foundational; culture, practice, the relationships that exist among objects, and between objects and their owners—these matters are secondary; they will manifest themselves in due time.

Finally, and different again, is the sunny, matter-of-fact realism represented in the work of Susan Huszar, whose photographic essays on “brothers” and “sisters” in the “Talk-about-books” series give us ordinary, flesh-and-blood children, dressing, playing, eating, and enjoying each other's company. Inevitably, the photographs present an image of what is normal and right against which young readers will measure themselves. On the whole, this is an image of which it is easy to approve. Efforts have been made to acknowledge racial diversity and the existence of disabled children; the activities in which the children are engaged are not glamorous, but familiar and reassuring. Nevertheless, there is little food for the imagination in these two books. The conspicuous absence of any conflict between brothers and sisters, the uniform cheerfulness of the weather and the smiles, create a misleadingly bland impression of what daily life is like. And the didactic impulse—embodied as it is in the indisputable realism of the photograph—is perhaps a little too naked for my liking.

Theoretical considerations notwithstanding, what can be said about the actual pleasure to be taken in reading the books? All are sturdily bound; all have withstood a rugged test-drive by a sixteen-month-old child. The most exciting and stimulating by far are the “condensed classics.” Brock Irwin's water-colour illustrations are bold and uncluttered, while at the same time detailed enough to provide subjects for many conversations and explanations. His renderings of Shakespeare's stage, the Galapagos Islands as they appeared to Darwin, and the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony capture the spirit of these landmarks in Western history; and Irwin has had the estimable good sense to let Van Gogh's renderings of the landscape around Arles stand by themselves, unadapted. The “text” in this series—less a commentary on the pictures than a list of suggestions for the adult explicator to raise with the child—is found, unobtrusively, on the back cover. Though the project is ambitious—and may

strike one at first as a little ponderous—it is executed with such a light touch and with such obvious affection for the scenes and ideas portrayed that children will quickly become comfortable with creative thinking in general. With luck, they may also develop an interest in ideas that will outlast the mystifications of elementary school and carry them into their adult lives.

Very young toddlers will enjoy the Sandseed Collection: the simplicity and sparseness of the illustrations are just right for children who are learning the names of common objects. My young collaborator in this article had his first experience of making a direct connection between a thing and a representation of a thing while poring over the drawings of H el ene Desputeaux. We studied her apple; we bit into apples of our own; and when I asked “Where’s the apple?” he pointed at all three in rapid succession and laughed heartily. The same intensity of interest has not been evident, however, with the “Talk about” series, though the level of concentration required is similar. This leads me to conclude that the charm of drawings consists in their *difference* from the object represented; the charm of photographs, which consists in their *similarity* to tangible objects, appears to be lost on the young child. The element of surprise—vital in learning at this or any age—is lacking in a photograph. I may, on the other hand, be the prisoner of my own preconceptions here, and my son may be conveying in his subtle way that while apples are welcome and good, brothers and sisters are emphatically not. In any case, neither of these considerations is an issue where the “condensed classics” are concerned. Never having seen a symphony orchestra or a Galapagos turtle, he felt free to immerse himself in the self-contained worlds of these little books; I suspect that this is a pleasure that he will remember and repeat.

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POEMS TO CHUCKLE OVER

A Dozen Million Spills and Other Disasters. sean o huigan. Illus. John Fraser. Black Moss Press, 1993. 24 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-967-X. **Primary Rhymery.** Sonja Dunn. Illus. Mark Thurman. Pembroke Publishers Ltd., 1993. 32 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55138-005-6.

Derivative seems a little ponderous, perhaps, for a couple of thin books of goofy poems for little kids, and maybe it is. There is always room for fun in poetry, and no reviewer wants to be told to lighten up. Still one wonders whether there will ever be an end of chicken pox poems or visits to the dentist poems, or skinned knee poems. Probably not.

Both books fall within the hilarity sub-genre. Nobody produces sillier hilarity than sean o huigan, already widely known for his *Scary Poems for Rotten Kids*. This author is very much at it again in *A Dozen Million Spills and Other*