

The borders she has created for the bottom of most pages are marvelous — they catch key elements of each tale and hold them gently for a reader, creating a dialogue of image and tale that adds a needed lyricism to the volumes. Those borders almost do what Evetts-Secker's language doesn't. Almost. *If* there is a universal for me in folk tales, it is the beauty of human voices, of human languages, raising one improbable moment out of the muck of whatever we are. When I finish these books, I am left wondering, where are the words to say the strength of the human heart, to speak our frailties, our nobility, our dailiness. There is much of value and substance in these books, much to delight in and enjoy, but those words, that lift — they are not here.

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Pig Heaven: Growing Up in the Barnyard

Frankie on the Run. Linda Holeman. Illus. Heather Collins. Boardwalk Books, 1995. Unpag. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 1-895681-09-X. *Gruntle Piggle Takes Off.* Jean Little. Illus. Johnny Wales. Viking, 1996. Unpag. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-86340-8.

As long as there have been children and pigs, astute adults have seen the connections between them. Even before Lewis Carroll immortalized the relationship with the startling depiction of a "pig-baby," the similarities were there to be remarked on.

Neither Jean Little nor Linda Holeman flinches when confronting the reader with a thinly-veiled pig-hero/heroine, really meant as a vehicle for any self-respecting child to identify with. Any children's writer worth her salt knows that children's books are about the traumas of growing up, and the pigs in the titles know that theirs is definitely a quest for independence.

But what does a pig and/or child have to look forward to in the big, wide grown-up world? Holeman's book is a kissing cousin to classics like E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* in some respects, though its take on the human world has no satiric edge. In Holeman's book, Frankie is pure pig in terms of the situation he finds himself in, even though endowed with child-like behaviour and perceptions. Like White's celebrity pig, Wilbur, Frankie is in danger of becoming bacon and finds it hard to believe that Farmer Halley would deceive him so treacherously. Like Wilbur, Frankie escapes to a better world, not through wit, alas, but more through happenstance, and finds himself not at a fair, but at a more benign if less glamorous destination: a petting zoo. Independence Day, it seems, can be best celebrated if you can "earn your keep" and get a job. Fast friends, à la E.B. White, seem a preferable alternative, to my way of thinking. I hate to think that independence means making your way in the world by becoming a love-object to children, even if the work is easy, and even if Frankie does save his own bacon by doing it. It beats living on the

street with roving bands of mangy cats and wicked dogs, or so the story suggests. I suppose this is the “real world,” but I prefer it satirized as White does it, rather than presented “straight up.” Still, there is lots of suspense at the chapter breaks, a well-told story, and illustrations full of feeling, reminiscent of the great Garth Williams.

Jean Little gives us less reality and less naturalism in her depiction of a city pig named Gruntle who lives with her parents in a high rise and has only heard stories of swill and manure and of her legendary grampa in the country. When Gruntle “takes off,” she finds her roots in the country and makes the journey back home, having learned a few things even her parents don’t know.

What is best about this book — and there is a lot to admire — are the inside jokes. For any adult laden with the responsibility of reading to the kids, this book is a treasure. Gruntle’s mother tells us, for example, about how she left home and met “the pig of her dreams”; Gruntle keeps her spare change in an appropriate place (a “kiddy bank”) and even the names are a chuckle. Mother is Frances Bacon-Piggle, a modern woman who kept her own venerable name; Papa is Crispin Piggle; and their address is (where else?) but “Pigs’ Digs,” where a doorman named Mr. Ham delivers their mail. The sheep say things like “La di da and poop poop”, making them an odd cross between Annie Hall and Toad of Toad Hall.

In transforming herself from a city pig to a “real pig” — in a pastoral setting — Gruntle takes her clothes off and reverts to the nudity so enjoyed by animals on a spree, in the tradition of Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit. Though Grampa has been dismissed by his daughter as a potential bad influence on the youngster Gruntle, she finds more than just mud and manure on her journey. For one thing, she discovers that Grampa cannot read and sets about teaching him his letters. How many adults reading the book for the twentieth time will wish they were in the same position? The role reversal is brilliant.

Although swills and manure are a far cry from the life of an urban only piglet, Gruntle learns that there is more to life than the bubble baths and truffle ice cream she has been accustomed to at home.

But home is the place for piglets — even sophisticated ones who wear sunglasses. The illustrations are genius, with details enough to keep readers laughing and pointing, and with tenderness and comic brilliance and great technique thrown in. Johnny Wales takes the best anthropomorphic tradition of William Steig and marries it to the splendid aerial perceptions of Mitsumasa Anno. His illustrations brought this book a nomination for the Governor General’s Award. There’s even more than the text supplies. It should be no surprise, then, that Gruntle’s apartment building is on the corner of Orwell Road. This is truly a book for all ages to delight in. And Jean Little once again makes these things look so easy.

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