

## Positive Princesses: Images for Today

*Carly's Stories*. Ken Ainsworth. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick Press, 1995. 24 pp. \$16.95 lib. binding, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-381-1, 1-55037-380-3. *The Charlotte Stories*. Teddy Jam. Illus. Harvey Chan. Douglas & McIntyre/Groundwood Books, 1994. 48 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-210-6. *Estelle and the Self-Esteem Machine*. Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet. Illus. Leslie Bell. Red Deer College Press, 1993. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-097-0. *Jillian Jiggs to the Rescue*. Phoebe Gilman. North Winds Press, 1994. 36 pp. \$13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-74616-2. *Lights for Gita*. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story Press, 1994. 24 pp. \$12.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-63-5, 0-929005-61-9. *Where is Gah-Ning?* Robert Munsch. Illus. H el ene Desputeaux. Annick Press, 1994. 32 pp. \$14.95 lib. binding, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-983-6, 1-55037-982-8.

The following selection of books draws one into the inner world of the child with varying degrees of success and in differing ways. The focus is upon resourceful heroines, their immediate family and siblings, and how they deal with their worries and fears. On the whole, they inhabit a gentle world of loving parents, a comfort zone, and not the harsh world of the dispossessed and poor.

*Carly's Stories*, by Ken Ainsworth, depicts a pastel world that is soft and comforting. Carly, an adorable blond toddler, mingles fantasy and fact in telling stories of events in her day. In her tales of baby "bores and lions and tigers," one can sense some of the common fears of children. She has a cute way of mispronouncing words and her every remark is responded to with love and attention. Softly-coloured illustrations depict both Carly's stories and her family's positive and helpful response to them as they seek to help her with her fears.

The book convincingly conveys the intimate experience of oral storytelling and encourages storytelling by children and imaginative play in a family. This smiling vignette of family life, prettily framed, is a very loving picture of a father and his daughters, and of a big sister caring for a little one. Carly has a perky charm enhanced by pink pig slippers and a scruffy bunny held by one ear. A fluffy white dog furthers this perfect family palette. However, a little bit of punch, a cross word, a tired parent — all would be welcome additions.

*Estelle and the Self-Esteem Machine* starts in an interesting and forthright way: "Estelle could not tie her shoelaces," a dilemma that today's velcro generation tends to overlook. Her unhappy and frazzled teacher sends her to the Self-Esteem machine for a new coat of self-confidence. Her fellow sufferers are an unlikely and unattractive collection who include a cheese inspector, chef, businessman and fat lady. Certainly, children will not relate to these categories. The machine, overwhelmed by the fat lady, grinds to a stop but the lineup of needy persons inexorably increases and eventually includes Estelle's teacher. Modern mechanics and technology are called upon and fail. Under Estelle's diligent guidance and with the help of her teacher, they look to the past for an answer. Finally, a weary old man remembers "that people used to build up each other's self-esteem" and that they should learn to reach out to one another.

This is a well-meant story with a message of sharing and helping one another. Indeed, children should feel good about themselves, but the story is too contrived and the humorous terms, as in the name of the teacher, Ms. Guided, have a distinctly adult tone. And self-esteem has become a battered and tarnished term, a worthwhile concept brought low by the well-intentioned, through overuse. The use of a fat lady is jarring and unpleasant. She remains in the final frame, gargantuan and gluttonous and still eating away, in an awkward and unsuitable ending.

Phoebe Gilman, a gifted Canadian author/illustrator, has received the prestigious Vicky Metcalf Award for her body of work. Jillian Jiggs, heroine of *Jillian Jiggs*, and *The Wonderful Pigs of Jillian Jiggs* is continued in *Jillian Jiggs to the Rescue*, a tale told in rollicking verse. Little sister Rebecca is crying and afraid of the dark. She knows she can rely on her big sister for comfort and for creative solutions. Jillian and friends build Rebecca a monster machine to deal with (not deny) her fears. In this adult-free world and in a wonderfully messy playroom filled with boxes, crayons, and string, the kids create a monster machine that is kid-powered and means business. With brave words, our noisy and alive heroes march through the woods to the mantra of “Kalamazoo” and the swinging refrain “Monster, you’re meatloaf. Monster, you’re through” until they meet the monster. Fearful Rebecca rises to the occasion and wants the monster to play, for he may be lonely or sad. And the monster is revealed to be a pussycat.

The illustrations capture the sense of play, and of Rebecca, small in size, pulling her friends away from the monster and suddenly growing up. There are exuberant and endearing touches with text and illustration nicely matched. Two eyes, far from monstrous, peek out cautiously from under the monster machine. Wonderful action words enliven the text. The playroom is for active play and happily without video games and television. A sense of a Toronto neighbourhood pervades the book, with a neat view of the Toronto skyline included. There is a comforting carryover from previous stories with the pigs of Jillian Jiggs ensconced in the playroom.

In *The Charlotte Stories*, Teddy Jam has created a distinctive heroine who is questioning, quirky, and determined. Charlotte’s words and thoughts frame the three illustrated stories included. In “New Boy,” “The Birthday Party,” and “Charlotte and the Mouse,” the focus is on everyday incidents and the small but all-encompassing world of play and relationships.

In an arresting image, we first encounter Charlotte hanging upside down in the park — a good way of approaching a contrary young person. She and her friend Miriam, budding feminists, meet a new boy, a possible enemy, and gradually discover the joys of friendship. It’s unusual and refreshing to find a picture book at this level that deals so honestly with boy-girl relationships and the possibility of rejection. In “The Birthday Party,” Charlotte doesn’t want a party despite her mother’s urging. She misbehaves and is disagreeable on the special day. Eventually, she reveals that she had been frightened in school when she accidentally shut herself in the cleaning cupboard. With the exorcism of her unpleasant memories, she is able to rejoin her friends and enjoy a wonderful day.

In “Charlotte and the Mouse” we meet a kinder, gentler Charlotte, who endeavours to save and rescue the mouse that lives in her house. Endearingly, she leaves cheese for the mouse to eat, and each night springs the trap so he won’t be caught. The depth of characterization, the flashes of humour and the support of the fine illustration are the hallmarks of this story. The mouse, quivering on the counter, and Charlotte creeping downstairs, are captured perfectly in soft and subdued watercolours.

These are perceptive stories that emphasize individuality. They are also somewhat complex and non-linear. For example, Charlotte’s reason for not wanting a birthday party is not explicit but implied in a rather unrelated experience. There are some unlikely and discordant elements such as an unlocked cupboard filled with dangerous cleaning supplies in a school setting and a little boy dressed in full hockey regalia in what appears to be summer. But, in general, this is a lovely, warm book that captures the emotional nuances and difficulties of caring and belonging.

Another strong, determined heroine who never takes no for an answer is Gah-Ning of *Where is Gah-Ning* by Robert Munsch, a delightful story about a girl who desperately wants to visit Kapuskasing down the road from her home. She tries to ride her bicycle, and then to roller blade, and each time her dad comes and pulls her back because in Kapuskasing, beware, people shop like crazy. The library, of course, provides the right answer. A clown is giving out balloons there and Gah-Ning floats her way down the Trans-Canada Highway, merrily holding on to three hundred balloons. “Oh, no!!! yelled the father,” jumping into his car to rescue her.

This is a particularly lively read-aloud, enlivened by the usual Munsch madness, and by his practice of carefully polishing his work with audiences of youngsters. Tongue-in-cheek humour, word play, frantic action and the beat of the words “Gah-Ning” and “Kapuskasing” make this a bouncy and high-spirited text.

The illustrations are set on the page in interesting ways and framed in vivid tones, capturing the exuberance of Gah-Ning and the zoom of balloons as they fill the pages to pull the eye up. The curve of trees cleverly delineates Gah-Ning’s path and amusing details catch the eye of the reader.

Gah-Ning is a most appealing child and her disobedience is disarming. She is both determined and resourceful. In a surprise ending, one finds that the fantasy is grounded in reality. There is a real Gah-Ning. Robert Munsch relates how he met her through a letter and drawing and decided to tell her story. The concluding note movingly recounts how he was shown the special places in the girl’s town and the most important place of all, the grave of her grandmother. The narrative offers a remarkable sense of community as it explores the importance of family respect, Chinese heritage, and youthful high spirits.

*Lights for Gita* is a sympathetic tale about a little girl dealing with a new life in Canada, a cold and very different country. In the background is a sense of Canadian life with its conscious recognition of the ethnic and cultural differences among people.

Gita misses her family in India but she plans on sharing her favourite holiday, Divali, with some new friends. Her family has planned an evening with fireworks, delicious sweets and diyas (oil lamps) to mark the occasion. A freezing rain prevents her friends from coming over but the lamps are lit and light permeates her home and the pages of the story. With the help of one friend who braves the elements, and the thoughtful and meaningful explanation by her parents about the true meaning of Divali, the evening becomes a special one. The universal lesson of Divali is about the search within oneself for an inner illumination to fill the darkness. The warmth and love of this family provide another type of light.

This is a deceptively simple story that works on many levels. Priestly has used contrast and colour well. There is a subtle blend of Canadian snowsuits and vivid saris to denote the mingling of two cultures. The grey colours of a November landscape emphasize the bright hues of orange and red and the strong patterns within the home. This is a thoughtful design with framing used to enclose the characters and action and to provide a sense of inclusion in Gita's world. Windows serve as a particularly strong element and reflect Gita's looking out upon an unfamiliar landscape, indeed a reflection of the immigrant experience. Flickering flames, a window filled with light, and frost-filled trees are beacons for the eye. In the closing picture, Gita and her friend are outside, smiling and looking to each other, a red scarf tying them together.

This collection of books shares a strong unifying theme of young girls using wit and ingenuity to deal with difficult situations. Set firmly in the present, and told liltily from a child's perspective, all present positive images to follow. It is the heroines themselves, sturdy and resilient, yet little girls throughout, who determine the success of each work.

The landscape these youngsters inhabit is one of caring, affectionate parents and unusually supportive siblings. These are small interior worlds, nicely presented, which look for simple truths sometimes lost in our mechanical time. Technology, and the world of the machine are seen as unnecessary and artificial constructs when they obtrude. Indeed, electricity falters, the self-esteem machine crumbles and the monster machine is cardboard and crayon. On the whole, these are well-crafted tales; many feature surprise twists and unusual endings. The socko smash and deadpan humour of *The Paper Bag Princess* remains an elusive ideal, but the young reader will welcome and enjoy these attractive and meaningful works.

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