

ing with parents. But the emphasis is on humour, sometimes the rueful kind, sometimes slapstick. The line drawings by Pat Wilkinson are appropriately cartoon-like. Dawber's book is likely to have more immediate appeal, but the reader who is fond of words will find much to return to in Nickel's fine verbal artistry.

Bert Almon teaches English at the University of Alberta where he was named a Killam Annual Professor for 1999-2000. He has published eight collections of poetry.

Literary and Didactic Aims

There's a Mouse in My House. Sheree Fitch. Illus. Leslie E. Watts. Doubleday, 1997. Unpag. \$18.95, \$8.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-385-25561-6, 0-385-25706-6. *If I Were the Moon.* Sheree Fitch. Illus. Leslie E. Watts. Doubleday, 1999. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25744-9. *No Dragons for Tea: Fire Safety for Kids (and Dragons).* Jean Pendziwol. Illus. Martine Goubault. Kids Can, 1999. Unpag. \$14.95, \$5.95, cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55074-569-7, 1-55074-571-9.

A common pattern in children's books is the intrusion of an animal into the cosy domestic world of the child: order and security are threatened but not often seriously (consider *The Cat in the Hat*). Sheree Fitch uses this situation in her very successful books, *Sleeping Dragons All Around*, *Monkeys All Around*, and *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen!* Her latest contribution to the genre is *There's a Mouse in My House*, in which a homeless mouse and her aged mum take refuge in a boy's house. The mother is a believer in nonviolence, but ironically makes an exception for mice. She wants the boy to act as exterminator, but of course a peaceful resolution is found. The mouse asks for three last wishes: a glass of pop, a piece of cheese, and a chance to tell its story. The creature arouses compassion by telling the tragic events of its life — its father was killed by cats. It even traces its family back to Confederation times and had a "grand'mère from Old Québec." This is definitely a Canadian book: one scene even has a mouse version of the Canadian flag, with a mouse standing in for the maple leaf. Fitch has become a little ponderous, perhaps because she has overworked the basic animal-intruder narrative in her earlier books and feels a need to add some literary allusions: her mouse retells "Hickory Dickory Dock" and "Three Blind Mice." Indeed, the mouse is named Scheherazade and offers to tell a new story every night, creating a kind of rodent Arabian Nights. The text isn't as verbally extravagant as Fitch's earlier works in "utterachure" (her coinage for orally-based children's books), and the rhymes are often forced rather than zestful, though "Copenhagen" rhymed with "station wagon" is droll. This is still an enjoyable book, with a lesson in tolerance (that staple of modern children's books). Leslie Watts is Fitch's best illustrator to date, with egg tempera pictures that abound in detail and wit. Watts is especially good at conveying the effects of artificial light.

In *If I Were the Moon*, Fitch has tried writing a lullaby. The book is very short

on text. The aim is to soothe, to create an atmosphere of warmth. The basic pattern is the use of couplets and quatrains to pose hypothetical statements like "If I were the moon," and "If I were a flower," completing them with such statements as "I'd shine down my light," "I'd grow just for you." The poetry is rather minor, which is surprising considering that Fitch has written poems for adults. The pleasure of the book is in Leslie's Watts's rich illustrations, egg tempera again, which show people of all races and ages in a variety of activities. The final stanza asserts the value (a very contemporary one!) of being satisfied with oneself: "But I am who I am, / And that's even better. / We'll all be together / Today / and forever." Children who love the rollicking Sheree Fitch may be a little disappointed in this low-key text. On the other hand, it is meant to induce slumber.

The aims of *No Dragons for Tea* are old-fashioned: didactic rather than artistic. Pendziwol's text is meant to teach the elements of home fire safety to six-year olds through a narrative in which a dragon is invited home for tea and accidentally sets the tablecloth on fire. The situation is amusing, though the verses of the narrative are rather plodding and the book might have been shortened. But the final "dragon's Fire Safety Rhyme" will be easy for a child to memorize. There is also a fire safety checklist at the end of the book. Gourbault's drawings are delightful, rendered in Prismacolor pencils, which manage to look soft-textured and bright at the same time. This book is not quite literature, but its aims are honourable and it should serve its purpose.

Bert Almon teaches English at the University of Alberta. He has published eight collections of poetry and a critical biography of William Humphrey.

Children's Picturebooks of the Canadian Prairie

The Prairie Fire. Marilyn Reynolds. Illus. Don Kilby. Orca, 1999. Unpag. \$17.95, cloth. ISBN 1-55143-137-8. *One Duck.* Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick, 1999. Unpag. \$18.95, 7.95, cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-561-X, 1-55037-560-1. *A Barnyard Bestiary.* David Bouchard. Illus. Kimball Allen. Orca, 1999. Unpag. \$17.95, cloth. ISBN 1-55143-131-9.

Three new picture books from Western Canada imaginatively explore children's lives on the Canadian prairie and do so, in fact, in a manner evocative of the prairie itself: within the seemingly repetitive, inescapable, sometimes oppressive reality of the prairie landscape, childlike vigour and imagination can both notice and create a place not merely liveable, but alive, vital, an abundant home.

Of the three books, this duality is most obvious in *The Prairie Fire*, written by Marilyn Reynolds and illustrated by Don Kilby. Reynolds is retelling an ancestral settler story, one built upon the oldest clichés of realistic prairie fiction: a large wheat farm, stern parents, a brave young boy, and a threatening fire. Clichés fail, however, by oversimplifying complex realities, and if one's environment is at once