

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.

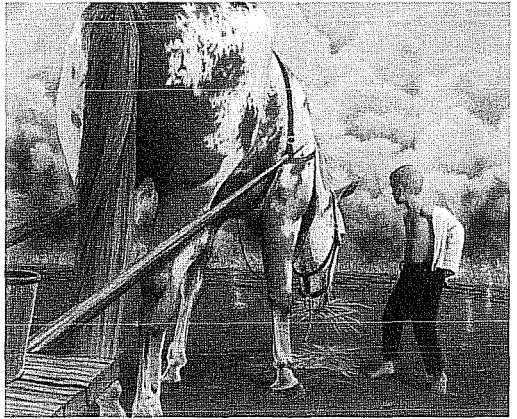
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Children's Picturebooks of the Canadian Prairie

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



*Illustration from The
Prairie Fire*

immense, omnipresent, and yet simple, like the prairie landscape, then perhaps the notion of originality is irrelevant. Led into this landscape by Kilby's detailed illustrations, readers can naturally follow and identify with the young boy, "Percy," as he ingeniously blindfolds the terrified horse, "Maud," so that she can pull a rain barrel from fire to fire. Nature thus structures literary suspense and climax, as "with a rush of hot air, the prairie fire passed by the homestead," and finally denouement: son, mother, and father "clung together in the smoking yard." Yet Reynolds' concluding image of Percy being invited by his father to do "adult" work is illustrated in spectacular shades of pink, purple, and orange that few would describe as "natural" or "realistic." Prairie sunsets, however, really can look exactly as Kilby portrays, and anyone who makes the prairie home will come to know the fleeting beauty of a huge sky painted in elaborate, impressionistic shades of brilliant color.

One Duck, by Hazel Hutchins, is illustrated by Ruth Ohi in softer yet still realistic textures, and Hutchins's own mimetic aims are suggested by the back cover, which straightforwardly explains how a female mallard lays, protects, and nurtures her young ducklings over a twenty-eight day period. But a scientific explanation does not, of course, do justice to the reality of this rather miraculous process, especially on the open prairie. Hutchins's text thus adopts a simple but poetic style that allows us to focus, indeed meditate, on nature's serene wonders:

One duck
at first light
feeds on a prairie pond.

Hutchins writes from a child's point of view but also, she would quickly add, through the eyes of farmers, the group to whom her book is dedicated. It is "one farmer" who eventually preserves the nest of the "one duck," because he has the precise, curious, and most of all concerned eye for nature needed to save the duck's eggs from his circling tractor, after the duck had avoided a circling crow —

the natural and unnatural dangers that supply this story's suspense. Finally, however, as with Reynolds's "Percy," it is the farmer's youngest daughter who "points out ...":

One duck
waddling over the stubble field
followed by
twelve ducklings...
just doing what ducks do —

Ohi's drawing for this page shows twelve fuzzy young ducklings being led into water, which is what, the back cover tells us, a mother duck does "as soon as the chicks are dry." Within the text, however, the picture clearly signifies much more than scientific fact; rather, Hutchins's poetry reminds us that if we look at the prairie through the clear, compassionate eyes of both farmers and children, we will see abundant life flourishing all around us.

Like *One Duck*, David Bouchard's *A Barnyard Bestiary* is a poetic work that asks us to take a closer, wiser look at nature, but here the animals themselves speak, often in ironic, angry, didactic voices. The initial model for Bouchard, a longtime Regina resident now living in BC, is probably the buffalo, who appears on the cover (in robust splendour on the spare prairie, painted by Kimball Allen), and inside grunts:

I have reason to be bitter
More than most of those around me
Yet I focus on the future
In the hope that they have learned.

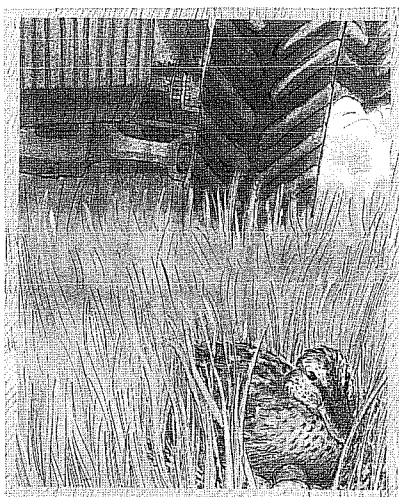


Illustration from
One Duck



*Illustration from A Barnyard
Bestiary*

Bouchard extends his bestiary of environmental education by gazing far beyond his immediate horizons, as prairie people naturally do, and including animals from around the globe. Their common bond is the lack of respect that “they” — humans — have given these animals’ natural habitats; from Japan, an Onagadori chicken; from Scotland, a Highland cow; from the US, a turkey. The list expands, but each of Bouchard’s rough poets makes one central point: if people can learn to appreciate animals’ unique qualities, the entire world may yet become a home fit for both; or, in the animals’ own collective, concluding lines:

In fact if they start to see the
Many things that make us special,
I dare say there might be changes
In the way they live their lives.

A childish hope, some might say, but anyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see *A Barnyard Bestiary*, *One Duck*, or *The Prairie Fire*, cannot fail to gain a new perspective on, and new hope in, the future of the children who call the Canadian prairie home.

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