

Take Me Away, Please

Yuck, a Love Story. Don Gillmor. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart Kids, 2000. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-32187. *The Fear of Angelina Domino*. Budge Wilson. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Stoddart Kids, 2000. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3217-9. *Mr. McGratt and the Ornerly Cat*, Marilyn Helmer. Illus. Martine Gourbault. Kids Can, 2000. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-564-6 *The Cowboy Kid*. Gilles Tibo. Illus. Tom Kapas. Tundra, 2000. Unpag. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-473-8.

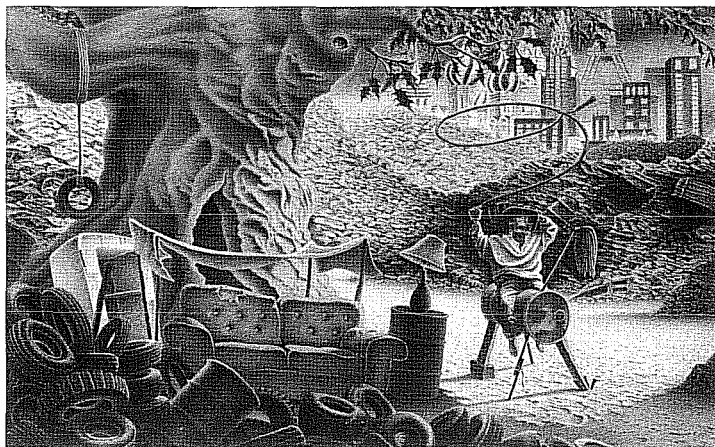


Illustration by Gilles Tibo, from
The Cowboy Kid

Should children's books have messages that teach life-lessons or should they simply be gifts for the imagination? Although it is not possible for me to answer within the context of a book review, my own preference is the book that engages the imagination.

There is a market for books that teach life-lessons, and, in my opinion, lessons can be taught in a subtle way. In *Yuck, A Love Story*, lessons about tolerance and friendship between Austin and Amy, the girl who moves in next door, are skilfully woven into a story filled with humour and magic. Nothing is impossible in the imagination of a young child and the author uses this cleverly to creative advantage. For Amy's birthday, Austin wrestles the moon and brings it back to Amy for her birthday present even though he tells his friend Sternberg that Amy is yucky. The dialogue is natural and the illustrations are vibrant. It is a delightful book in every respect.

In *The Fear of Angelina Domino*, the message is not subtle in any way. The storyline revolves around Angelina's fear of animals, which arises after Angelina gets a kitten that bites and scares her. Even though her parents give the kitten

away, Angelina's fear of cats and other animals prevents her from enjoying visits to the zoo and a farm. One day, Angelina's friend, Josephine, puts an old stray cat in Angelina's room as a trick. The cat curls up on Angelina's bed and goes to sleep until he is discovered. With the help of her mother, Angelina confronts her fear and befriends the cat. Although I know that most young children have fears and can therefore identify with Angelina, I found the resolution of Angelina's fears too simplistic. It would have been more realistic to have Angelina scream and run into her mother's arms when she first encountered the stray cat on her bed, not stand still and hold her breath and then intellectually analyze her fear. "I want to take my fear and bury it in a deep hole." In a very short time, Angelina goes from fearing all animals to loving the stray and feeling "wonderful" and "full of amazement." To me, it sets up unrealistic expectations for the child readers who are dealing with their own fears. It is never this straightforward. I also found the language to be strangely sophisticated for a children's book. Two sentences in particular were bothersome: "Mrs. Domino felt depressed"; Josephine "wanted to hear Angelina yell blue murder." I would not expect a five-year old to understand what "depressed" or "blue murder" means nor would I want to explain it to them. The most appealing part of the book are the illustrations which are lively, colourful and fun.

In *Mr. McGratt and the Ornerly Cat*, the author tells a simple story about a man and a surly cat who appears one day on his doorstep. Mr. McGratt tries to give the cat away to different neighbours but one after another they bring it back. The cat is just too grouchy. Gradually Mr. McGratt comes to realize that since the cat arrived, the neighbour's dog is no longer shredding his newspaper, the boy from next door stops cutting through the pumpkin patch and the starlings have stopped eating his pears. In the end, Mr. McGratt invites the cat to stay. The plot was amusing on its own and the illustrations are wacky and fun. Best of all, the messages about friendship, tolerance and acceptance are left for the reader to discover.

In *The Cowboy Kid*, there is no underlying life lesson. Instead we have a book that is truly a present for the mind and a feast for the eyes. In this story, a homeless boy, a cowboy of the streets, encounters a golden horse who takes him for a magical ride to round up the horses of the city. Wooden horses escape from their rockers, carousel horses break free from their moorings, sculpted horses tear away from their pedestals, and painted horses tear from their picture frames to join the Cowboy Kid and the flying herd on a trip to the Milky Way. The lyrical language in this book is very appealing. Phrases like "From the time of then and once, of yet and still and will be" and "drink deeply from the Milky Way, leaving glowing hoofprints on each star" create a potent sense of magic in the story. The full colour illustrations skilfully capture the mystery and dream like quality of the story. As beautiful as illustrations have been executed, many of them are double-paged spreads with the text on separate pages. This break in rhythm of the story for a young child who wants to look at a picture while the story is being read is a small irritating flaw. The story is one that can be read many times over and was my favourite of this selection.

As a parent, I have learned that my children prefer books that are filled with enchantment and creativity. Books like *The Cowboy Kid* and *Yuck, A Love Story* engage the imagination of both parent and child and thus can be read many times over. The books that preach messages are the ones that sit on the shelf, never to be

selected again after the first reading.

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Bugs Unlimited

There Ain't No Bugs on Me. Jerry Garcia. Illus. Bruce Whatley. Incl. audio cassette: song arr. and perf. by Jerry Garcia & David Grisman. HarperCollins, 1999. Unpag. \$23.50. ISBN 0-06-028142-1.

If repetition is a beloved aspect of much of the literature for the very young, readers who loved *The Teddy Bear's Picnic*, then, are sure to jump on this bandwagon. Two major differences separate these mirror-image productions, however. The new book, *There Ain't No Bugs on Me*, skirts the snooze factor of the original book by inserting mini-plots in which the bears are invaded by a horde of insects that use the band as their romping ground. Each bug expresses its own raison d'être in clothing and autonomous activities, their combined presence lending tension between the text/lyrics and the illustrations as we wonder why there "ain't no bugs" on the dog, an unanswered mystery to the end!

Four musicians (three bears and one dog) close their door and hang out the On Tour sign. The band travels by boat and train, they tramp through various weather and terrain, they sing around a campfire and splash in a creek. Meanwhile, each illustration tells the saga of a smaller story played out by the bugs within the larger journey motif. Take for example, the peanut episode: Text and lyrics say, "A peanut sittin' on a railroad track,/ His heart was all aflutter;/ Along came a choo-choo on the track — / Toot! Toot! Peanut butter!" No tragedy here, for subsequent illustrations create a Hollywood ending. While the enamoured peanut (holding a valentine to his breast) sits on a railroad track oblivious to the approach of a train, the girlfriend (peanut) runs in high-heels toward her love followed by a cowboy bug riding a frog and swinging a lariat — all too late to save him. No worry, Grisman dog is leaning down from the cow-catcher on the front of the train, ready to scoop up the silly peanut in a last minute rescue. Sure enough, on a subsequent page the two peanuts sit with arms entwined. Later yet, as the train heads for the tunnel, the couple appears above a "just married" sign hung from the caboose. Standard, Disney-style Americana? Yes.

Another difference between these parallel productions involves the Garcia/Grisman rendering of the buggy campfire song. This time round they replace the drudging pace of their *Teddy Bear's Picnic* with a bounce as insouciant as the world of children itself. The text/lyrics supply repetition in ten verses and eight choruses. When the ninth verse says, "Oh, it ain't gonna rain no more, no more,/it ain't gonna rain no more," and the illustration shows the band walking through a desert landscape between mesas, the audio uses a rain tube over. Doesn't make sense, but it sounds great! The text of the tenth verse reads "How in the heck can the old folks